

Sustainable Groundwater Management Workshop

**Grant Davis, General Manager
Sonoma County Water Agency
March 24, 2014**

Good morning, I am Grant Davis, General Manager of the Sonoma County Water Agency, a special district created by the legislature in 1949. Our operations span three counties in the northern Bay Area. In addition to our core responsibilities of supplying wholesale water to 600,000 customers, we provide flood control, and wastewater. We are the lead agency in two Groundwater management programs in Sonoma County and are participating on the California Water Foundation's groundwater steering committee.

Based on our experiences, which I will describe briefly, we believe local management works best. I will focus on what we have learned about sustainable Groundwater management, and identify two areas where we think the state can be of particular help.

Sonoma County Groundwater

In Sonoma County, groundwater is one of two primary sources of water for urban, rural residential, and agriculture water users – the other source being surface water from the Russian River system. Groundwater also plays an important role in supporting habitat for sensitive ecosystems.

Similar to other coastal areas, our GW basins are relatively small and geologically complex. Sonoma County itself is a large county with 14 GW basins.

In general, our region has experienced impacts to groundwater resources similar to many other areas of the state - such as declining water levels and water quality impairment. These have led over the years to conflict and sometimes litigation between urban, rural/agriculture, and environmental groups.

Groundwater Programs

Since 2000, the Sonoma County Water Agency and USGS have collaborated in a partnership to conduct a series of technical scientific studies in the four largest and most heavily populated groundwater basins.

To date, we have completed three of these studies and are expecting to begin the final study later this year. In two of the basins where we have conducted these studies, the Water Agency has engaged the Center for Collaborative Policy to conduct stakeholder assessments of residents and interests groups within these basins to:

- Gauge the level of understanding
- Learn how well GW management is understood and assess whether there is community support for some form of management.

In both cases, we heard loud and clear from stakeholders that (1) there is significant interest and concern about groundwater; and (2) groundwater should be locally managed in a voluntary and collaborative manner – not driven by a regulatory process.

Based on the stakeholder assessments, the Water Agency moved forward with Groundwater management planning in Sonoma Valley and the Santa Rosa Plain.

- For the Sonoma Valley - A stakeholder basin advisory panel developed an AB 3030/SB1938 plan in 2007 and has been implementing the plan since that time.
- In the Santa Rosa Plain, we have been working with a basin advisory panel since December 2012 to develop a management plan in compliance with AB3030/SB1938 and anticipating completion of the plan this summer.

Highlights of a sustainable plan:

Through both processes, we have identified seven key components for developing a program that we believe will lead to sustainable, locally-controlled Groundwater resources:

First component: A vibrant stakeholder participation process. A wide range of constituencies has become educated not only on groundwater but water issues in general. Stakeholders include urban, rural residential, business, municipal, environmental, tribal and agriculture interests.

This has resulted in the groundwater management programs being community based planning forums for integrated water resource management – not just groundwater management. We are now beginning to incorporate climate adaptation planning into these programs.

In coordination with our Groundwater management programs, we have been able to develop - and in some cases implement - conservation, stormwater recharge, recycled water and Groundwater banking projects targeted to help meet Basin Management Objectives.

Second component: Monitoring & Modeling. In Sonoma Valley we have gone from 50 wells that are monitored to 140 through a voluntary program. This provides data and allows us to see trends.

Third component: Groundwater Protection. Developing programs and educating people about the need to protect recharge areas and improve well management to ensure both quality and quantity.

Fourth component: Increased conservation. Educating people about the need to conserve water in order to protect GW resources.

Fifth component: Increased Groundwater recharge. With the support of stakeholders, we are exploring opportunities to increase recharge, including aquifer recharge by temporarily allowing captured stormwater to percolate into the ground. Another option is Groundwater banking during the winter.

Sixth component: Increased water reuse. In southern Sonoma Valley, where there are saline intrusion issues from San Pablo Bay, we have significantly increased the use of recycled water for both farmers and to help restore abandoned salt ponds.

Final component: Integrated water management. We are working closely with our contractors to encourage them to use Russian River water in rainy years, when it's plentiful, thereby allowing their Groundwater wells to recharge. We have a long way to go to incorporate all the elements of successful integrated management.

Areas of concerns & Opportunities for State Involvement

Despite our efforts, we have some areas where groundwater declines and resulting saline water intrusion are increasing - and with the current drought these impacts are exacerbated.

We are asking whether we need to look at other approaches to management, including land use policies and regulatory driven approaches.

We also face challenges in how we fund projects. We have been able to receive state funding to support some of our projects, but it takes a significant local investment to implement these programs on a continual basis.

To date, most of the funding has been through water rates paid by urban users - yet most of the Groundwater users are rural residential and agriculture.

Also, the areas where we see the most significant problems are in these non-urban areas.

Urban stakeholders are expressing reluctance to continue funding groundwater management programs unless agriculture, rural and other interest groups start to fund projects and programs.

It is very difficult to get funding from these sectors because agriculture and rural residential are not organized or represented by a water district or JPA, so we are dealing with a large number of independent operators.

This is a big problem in terms of funding and in working with these constituencies to manage groundwater since – in total -- they are the largest user groups.

The state could support local Groundwater management by providing funding mechanisms and incentives to organize and participate in groundwater management to help alleviate these potentially divisive issues. For example, providing funding and expertise in the creation of water districts or JPAs.

The state could also help at the local level by providing incentives for streamlined permitting for projects within an approved Groundwater management plan. One type of project where there is a lot of community enthusiasm is for stormwater recharge projects, which are challenging to permit.

In closing, I'd like to thank you for this opportunity to describe what we are doing in our region regarding sustainable groundwater management. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.