



(l-r) ACWA Vice President Ernie Avila, California State Senator Anglique Ashby and ACWA Deputy Executive Director Cindy Tuck pose for a photo during ACWA's 2024 Legislative Symposium, where Senator Ashby was a featured speaker.

SPOTLIGHT

Members Share Thoughts on SGMA at 10-Year Milestone

Aaron Fukuda keeps wondering when he'll see Porsches and Ferraris driving past his office in rural Tulare County. But so far, it's the same stream of old beat-up Ford F-150s driven by farmers and their workers.

The people driving those trucks keep the Tulare Irrigation District (TID) General Manager awake at night. They are family farmers and people who depend on Central Valley agriculture for a living, as opposed to the wealthy captains of the agri-business industry so often depicted in news media. And while those people certainly exist, they are not the ones most directly impacted by SGMA, pronounced sigma, which has long since become verbal shorthand for the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act.

Marking its 10th year this September, the landmark trifecta of legislation signed into law by Gov. Jerry Brown in 2014 is today moving from planning into implementation. SGMA answers a crisis that everyone agrees demanded a solution. That solution is locally based, a central principle strongly advocated by ACWA at SGMA's inception, and one that remains a driving force behind bringing California's groundwater into sustainability by 2040.

ACWA Hosts 2024 Legislative Symposium

ACWA's 2024 Legislative Symposium explored the latest in groundwater and water efficiency from a legislative and regulatory perspective while hosting one of the newer state senators about water-related priorities in California's capital.

The April 10 event attracted about 150 attendees to the SAFE Credit Union Convention Center, with Rancho Water and Eastern Municipal Water District as sponsors. The following summaries outline a few highlights, which opened with welcoming remarks from ACWA Vice President Ernie Avila and concluded with a networking reception.

SGMA Implementation

Panelists: (Moderator) Lauren Layne, Chair, ACWA State Legislative Committee; Pablo Garza, Chief Consultant, Assembly Water, Parks & Wildlife Committee;

Paul Gosselin, Deputy Director of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Office, Department of Water Resources; Kristin Sicke, General Manager, Yolo County Flood Control & Water Conservation District.

Key Issues(s): A panel discussion focused on the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act wrapping up its first decade this year as SGMA remains the focus of recent legislation. Sicke presented a case study on her district's approach to SGMA implementation as part of a broader panel discussion on critical issues and legislative priorities related to groundwater management.

Gosselin quote: "Every deadline that local agencies had in SGMA was met, which was phenomenal. ... I think the

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Providing the backbone behind SGMA, water agencies throughout the state formed Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSAs), which have drafted 94 Groundwater Sustainability Plans (GSPs).

Meanwhile, the state government has boosted local funding by providing more than \$500 million through the Department of Water Resources, or DWR. The funding is driving state assistance on multiple levels, ranging from technical help and data collection to language translation services, among many areas. The State Water Resources Control Board is serving as the final judge for GSPs' deemed inadequate through a probationary hearing process that could lead to state intervention into local groundwater management.

It's been a massive undertaking, and the hardest part may be yet to come. Addressing the severe overdrafting of groundwater basins could come at the cost of taking an estimated 500,000 to one million acres of farmland out of production, at an enormous economic and personal cost in terms of agricultural

production, not to mention livelihoods. ACWA member agencies have risen to the task with determination and innovation.

Three ACWA member agency leaders recently shared their perspectives on SGMA at 10 years, their work to achieve its goals as well as concerns about its impacts.

Central Valley

TID operates within the Mid Kaweah Groundwater Sub Basin GSA along with the cities of Visalia and Tulare. Its area has experienced some success with rising groundwater levels during wet years paired with an expected slowing of subsidence, according to Fukuda, who sees surface water storage and conveyance as key to answering SGMA's challenge. To that end, TID is pursuing its 200-acre McKay Point Reservoir and 250-acre Seaborn Reservoir projects to optimize surface water storage for groundwater recharge and flood control. But even more essential is building momentum through collaboration with communities and growers, with the latter greatly increasing their participation in the ongoing

allocation program and on-farm recharge during wet years.

However, casting a shadow over this progress is the SGMA process itself. TID's subbasin faces a probationary hearing before the State Water Board in November, which could result in the state's assuming direct control over SGMA implementation. This came after DWR found the district's GSPs inadequate, and TID is now on the third redraft of its GSP, an expensive and time-consuming process that Fukuda said threatens to sap the momentum behind his ongoing work to implement SGMA.

"If you're going into SGMA to achieve perfection, you're going to fail. SGMA is about momentum and moving the needle forward in the right direction," Fukuda said. "We shall see if the State Water Board will allow for our continued momentum or halt our momentum," Fukuda noted in response to the potential probationary process playing out in front of the Board.

The uncertainty has manifested itself in many ways, including a decline in property values, which along with the prospect

Opposite page: Workers prepare rebar lattice work before a cement pour at Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency's College Lake Water Supply project. The project is an example of ACWA member agencies' work to diversify water supplies to help take pressure off local groundwater basins. Photo courtesy of Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency

Right: Then-Gov. Jerry Brown signs into law the three-bill package that became SGMA in 2014, with past ACWA Executive Director Timothy Quinn looking on from far right. ACWA supported the legislation based on the principle that it would allow local control over addressing groundwater issues. Photo courtesy of DWR



of paying penalty fees could translate into economic hardship for the district's communities. And that has Fukuda worried about what that could mean for smaller-scale growers, such as generational family farmers struggling to make ends meet — the people driving the pickups past Fukuda's office.

"I've got to get my community through this, there's so much at stake," Fukuda said.

Tri-County Water Authority Executive Director Deanna Jackson shared similar concerns. Her district was scheduled for a probationary hearing this month. In the bigger picture, no one disagrees with the need for SGMA, but it's the process that is driving uncertainty.

"Growers want farming to be sustainable, they don't want to deplete groundwater aquifers. But SGMA has set up a situation where you have 'haves and have nots,'" Jackson said, also noting the heavy potential impacts on family farms and growers' ability to pass their operations onto the next generation.

"That is where the goodwill ends, and I think you're going to see a lot more pushback, probably in the next year or two," Jackson said. "I don't have a crystal ball, but let's just say it's becoming very real in our area, very quick."

SGMA as Validation

At the other end of the spectrum, but also serving an agricultural community, The Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency (PVWMA) operates through a DWR-approved alternative plan, the only one in the state for a critically overdrafted basin. Facing seawater intrusion and overdraft, the agency has invested decades of work into bringing its groundwater into sustainability by 2040. But the journey hasn't been easy.

The agency was among the first to require metering on agricultural wells in the 1990s. Back then, growers were less than enthusiastic about fees, especially ones operating in other areas of the state without them, said PVWMA General Manager Brian Lockwood.

"We had a lot of obstacles in front of us," Lockwood said. "We didn't have a great deal of support from the community prior to SGMA, and now we do."

Part of the work behind earning community support involved an early start, including the formation of a committee to evaluate the state of their basin in 2010. The agency is also working on its College Lake Water Supply project, which will diversify its supply and take pressure off its aquifer.

"SGMA really helped us. It was sort of validation of all our previous work," Lockwood said. "We could go out to the community and say, 'This work we've done together has really paid off.'"

Looking Ahead

For all its unprecedented challenges, SGMA is on schedule. DWR marked a major milestone in January when it completed the review process for GSPs covering high and medium priority groundwater basins. But the consensus remains that the hardest part may lie ahead. Paul Gosselin, Deputy Director of DWR's Sustainable Groundwater Management Office, noted that California is the last U.S. state to regulate groundwater.

"I suspect the next three to five years are going to be rocky as these implementation steps start to take hold," Gosselin said. "However, I remain absolutely confident in the commitment of our local agencies and partners. I think what we'll find is that California will be the one with the best approach out of all." ♦