



PRESS RELEASE

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CONTACT:

Ann DuBay
707.524.8378 (office)
707.322.8185 (cell)
Ann.DuBay@scwa.ca.gov

Rebecca Wachsberg
707.565.3782 (office)
Rebecca.Wachsberg@sonoma-county.org

County Boards Approve Formation of New Groundwater Sustainability Agencies

(Santa Rosa, CA) — On April 25, 2017 the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors and the Sonoma County Water Agency Board of Directors unanimously approved the formation of three joint powers agreements. These agreements will result in the creation of three new groundwater sustainability agencies (GSAs) that will ensure that the Santa Rosa Plain, Petaluma Valley and Sonoma Valley basins continue to have safe and reliable groundwater in the future.

The new agencies are required by a 2014 state law, the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA). The first requirement of SGMA is the creation of GSAs, which are regulatory bodies responsible for developing and implementing plans to sustainably manage groundwater. To bring a basin's groundwater into sustainability, the GSAs can develop recharge projects, promote recycled water, and provide incentives for water conservation, along with regulating groundwater use. GSAs are intended to ensure that there is a balance in the amount of water that is going out of and coming into groundwater basins.

“It is critical that we take a holistic look at groundwater use in these three basins,” said Sonoma County Board and Water Agency Chairwoman Shirlee Zane. “No one likes the idea of having their own well regulated, but we’ve heard many stories of residents’ groundwater use being impacted by a neighbor’s new well. These new agencies will help balance needs within the basins.”

In Sonoma County, the three areas immediately affected by SGMA are the Santa Rosa Plain, Sonoma Valley and Petaluma Valley. The action taken by the Board of Supervisors and the Water Agency Board of Directors on Tuesday will allow the County and Water Agency to participate in the three new GSAs. The same documents are being considered for adoption by cities, water districts and resource conservation districts in the three basins. If the basins aren't managed locally, the state may intervene.

“Groundwater is a critical resource. Creating GSAs in each basin allows us to maintain local control and maximize expertise and knowledge, while minimizing bureaucracy and costs,” said Sonoma County Supervisor and Water Agency Director David Rabbitt, who sits on a County-Water Agency ad hoc groundwater committee.

A final step in the creation of the GSAs are public hearings in each basin. The hearings are slated for June 1 (Santa Rosa Plain, 5:30 p.m., Santa Rosa Utilities Field Office, 35 Stony Point Road) and June 8 (Sonoma Valley, 5:30 p.m., Vintage House, 264 1st St E). The Petaluma Valley public hearing will be announced next week.

“Elected officials and staff in the three basins have been working together for two years to develop a governance process that is fair, efficient and representative. We have received input through a stakeholder assessment, community meetings and conversations with constituents. We believe that the boards and the advisory committees of the new agencies will ensure that all voices will be heard as the GSAs get down to work,” said Sonoma County Supervisor and Water Agency Director Susan Gorin, who also serves on an ad hoc groundwater committee.

The board action also included a commitment for initial funding of the new agencies. The entities involved in creating the new agencies are committing, countywide, a total of \$1.4 million for the first year of funding. The County and Water Agency each committed \$316,000.

ABOUT SGMA LOCALLY

SGMA was passed into California law in fall 2014. SGMA requires that State-designated medium- and high-priority basins form a GSA(s) and develop a groundwater sustainability plan(s). Sonoma County has three medium priority basins: Petaluma Valley, Santa Rosa Plain and Sonoma Valley; these basins have to comply with SGMA.

The Sonoma Valley has a voluntary groundwater management plan and Basin Advisory Panel and is in its 9th year of plan implementation. The Santa Rosa Plain adopted a voluntary groundwater management plan in 2014, has a Basin Advisory Panel, which recently completed its second year of implementing that plan. These voluntary programs have given these areas a head start in complying with SGMA by developing collaborative stakeholder relationships and providing technical data and information that will be needed by the GSAs. The City of Petaluma and the Water Agency have embarked on a study with the U.S. Geological Service to understand its basin. These programs will be incorporated as much as possible when developing the Groundwater Sustainability Plan.

The GSA-eligible entities have been meeting since 2015 to understand SGMA requirements and explore options for GSA formation. Basin Advisory Panels (in Sonoma Valley and Santa Rosa Plain) have provided input on reaching out to stakeholders and shared ideas on how eligible entities can work together. Public workshops were held in the fall of 2015, summer of 2016 and spring of 2017. A website, www.sonomacountygroundwater.org includes up-to-date information on SGMA and a place to sign up for more information.

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