

# SUSTAINABLE GROUNDWATER MANAGEMENT ACT IN SONOMA COUNTY

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS | SUMMER 2015

The Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) was passed into California law in fall 2014 and took effect in January 2015. The Act requires that state-designated medium and high priority basins must form a Groundwater Sustainability Agency (GSA) and develop a long-term groundwater sustainability plan. Of Sonoma County's 12 state-identified groundwater basins and sub-basins, three are designated as medium priority: Petaluma Valley, Santa Rosa Plain and Sonoma Valley. These basins must comply with SGMA. Sonoma County's remaining 11 basins and sub-basins are classified as low or very low priority. The state may change these classifications in the future.

For general information about SGMA, go to [www.sonomacountygroundwater.org](http://www.sonomacountygroundwater.org). These Frequently Asked Questions address how SGMA could impact Sonoma County.

## WHAT IS "SUSTAINABLE" GROUNDWATER MANAGEMENT?

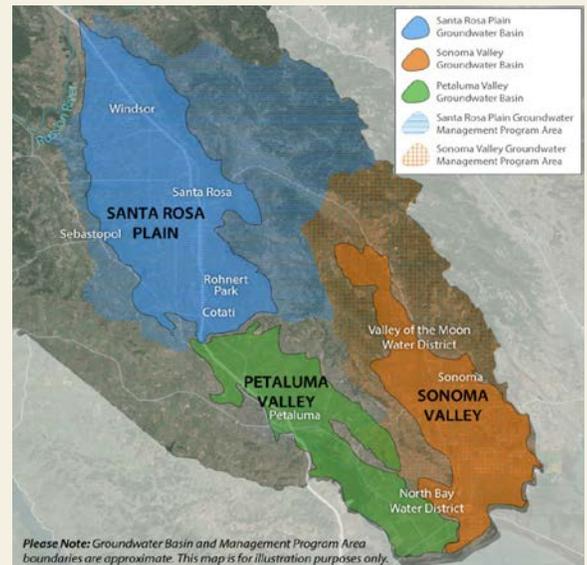
SGMA defines sustainable management as managing and using groundwater in a way that can be sustained over a long period of time. Specifically, SGMA defines sustainable yield as the amount of groundwater that can be withdrawn annually without chronically lowering groundwater levels, causing seawater intrusion, degrading water quality, causing land subsidence or depleting interconnected surface water (for example, creeks, streams and rivers) in a manner that causes significant and unreasonable impacts.

## WHAT AREAS OF SONOMA COUNTY ARE AFFECTED?

While Sonoma County has 14 state-identified groundwater basins and sub-basins, only three – **Santa Rosa Plain, Sonoma Valley and Petaluma Valley** – are currently designated medium priority by the California Department of Water Resources. SGMA requires these three basins to have a locally-adopted Groundwater Sustainability Plan (GSP) by 2022. A GSP is not required for Sonoma County's 11 low- and very low-priority basins and subbasins, nor does SGMA apply outside of mapped groundwater basins. Basins are prioritized based on a number of factors, including population, amount of irrigated agriculture and reliance on groundwater. The California Department of Water Resources may reprioritize basins in the future, which could result in medium-priority basins moving into the high-priority category and low- or very-low priority basins moving into the medium category.

## WHO WILL MANAGE GROUNDWATER IN SONOMA COUNTY?

The first requirement of SGMA is to form a Groundwater Sustainability Agency (GSA) by June 2017. SGMA defines GSA-eligible entities as a local agency that has water supply, water management or land use responsibilities within a groundwater basin. Any GSA-eligible entity or combination of GSA-eligible entities can form the GSA. The GSA will be a regulatory body that can set fees, require reporting, regulate how much groundwater is pumped, and monitor wells. The Sonoma County agencies eligible to serve as part of the GSAs are: the cities within the basin boundaries, the County, the Water Agency, and two water districts. In addition, the state recently determined that Sonoma Resource Conservation District is also a GSA-eligible entity.



If no agency steps forward to manage groundwater, the County of Sonoma becomes the default GSA. If the county opts out, the State Water Resources Control Board will step in. If multiple agencies within a basin express an interest in managing groundwater, the agencies must coordinate on a GSP.

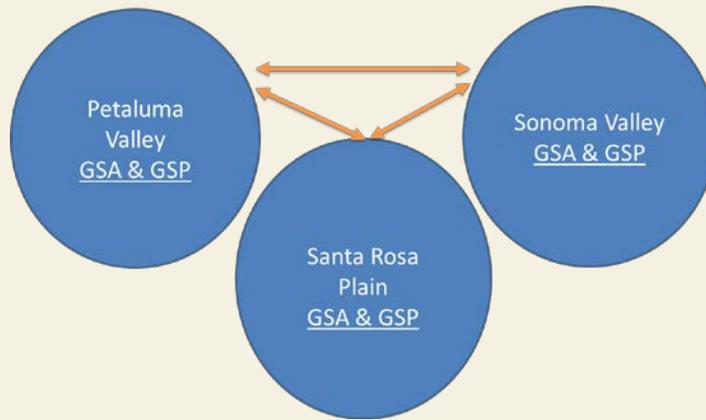
### WILL THERE BE ONE GSA OR SEVERAL?

Through the stakeholder assessment and conversations with GSA-eligible staff and existing basin advisory panels in Sonoma Valley and Santa Rosa Plain and input from public workshops, a few important considerations emerged:

- The GSAs should provide for local control with key decisions at the basin level management within each basin.
- The Groundwater Sustainability Plans (GSPs) should build off or leverage the existing groundwater management programs.
- Groundwater and surface water interaction should be managed as part of the GSPs.
- The structure and process should be kept as simple as possible.

### GROUNDWATER SUSTAINABILITY AGENCY

The GSA-eligible agencies agree that a **structure of one GSA and one GSP per basin** best meets local needs. Each GSA would be responsible for implementing SGMA in its basin, would possess all GSA authorities provided for in the law, and be responsible for developing and implementing the GSP. Each GSA would develop its own legal agreement and voting structure. The legal agreement could be a memorandum of understanding among the participating agencies, a joint powers authority, a special district, or other structure. Staff of the GSA-eligible agencies are working to develop recommendations on all these aspects of the GSA. Staff have and will again vet the recommendations with their boards and councils at public meetings and with the interested public at public workshops. Ultimately, the elected officials on the boards and councils of the GSA-eligible agencies will make the final decision on the GSA.



The GSAs are committed to information sharing across basins. Coordination between GSAs could occur for all external-facing activities and for developing frameworks to support groundwater management (for example, data management systems, regional studies or projects). Each GSA would retain its own authorities and would need to ratify recommendations that emerged through coordination.

### ENTITIES ELIGIBLE TO SERVE AS GROUNDWATER SUSTAINABILITY AGENCIES

SANTA ROSA PLAIN BASIN	PETALUMA VALLEY BASIN	SONOMA VALLEY BASIN
City of Cotati	City of Petaluma	City of Sonoma
City of Rohnert Park	North Bay Water District	North Bay Water District
City of Santa Rosa	Sonoma County	Valley of the Moon Water District
City of Sebastopol	Sonoma County Water Agency	Sonoma County
Town of Windsor	Sonoma Resource Conservation District	Sonoma County Water Agency
Sonoma County		Sonoma Resource Conservation District
Sonoma County Water Agency		
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### ISN'T GROUNDWATER ALREADY MANAGED IN SONOMA VALLEY AND SANTA ROSA?

Both Sonoma Valley and the Santa Rosa Plain groundwater basins have groundwater management plans that diverse stakeholder groups known as Basin Advisory Panels developed and have implemented collaboratively. These voluntary, non-regulatory plans are an excellent first step, and will significantly advance the region's ability to comply with the new law by establishing a robust data collection and monitoring program, and by promoting, studying and implementing programs and projects aimed at sustaining the basins' groundwater resources and fostering stakeholder coordination. These plans, however, do not meet the more stringent requirements of the new law and will need to be updated unless it can be demonstrated that the basin has operated within its sustainable yield over a period of at least 10 years.

For example, the current plans include actions that *could* result in sustainable groundwater basins, if implemented through the voluntary cooperation of well owners and agencies. In contrast, the new law requires each Groundwater Sustainability Plan to include actions that *will* be taken to meet the sustainability goal in each basin. SGMA also provides the GSA with powers and authorities to ensure that these basins will reach groundwater sustainability within 20 years.

## WHAT IS HAPPENING IN SONOMA COUNTY?

### In 2015:

- The Consensus Building Institute conducted and released a stakeholder assessment regarding groundwater sustainability agency formation.
- Staff from GSA-eligible entities met regularly to explore options for groundwater sustainability agency formation.
- Basin Advisory Panels (in Sonoma Valley and Santa Rosa Plain) learned about SGMA and provided input on reaching out to stakeholders and shared ideas on how eligible entities can work together.
- In public meetings, the councils and boards of GSA-eligible entities provided input on principles for developing groundwater sustainability agency governance options, on a skeleton governance structure and on an outreach and communications plan.
- The public learned about SGMA requirements and provided input on GSA formation in public workshops, held in November and December, in each basin.
- A website was created to provide information on SGMA and Sonoma County activities, [www.sonomacountygroundwater.org](http://www.sonomacountygroundwater.org). The website includes an email sign-up list for people interested in receiving information about the act.

### In 2016:

- Staff of the GSA-eligible entities continue to meet to flesh out options for governance, including the structure and role of GSA boards and advisory committees; financing; legal options; and public input.
- Staff is emailing monthly updates to interested stakeholders, letting people know about recent developments and providing opportunities for engagement.
- Sonoma County, the Water Agency, City of Santa Rosa and North Bay Water District provided comments on the state's draft regulations on Groundwater Sustainability Plan requirements.
- The GSA-eligible entities received a \$250,000 grant from California Department of Water Resources to develop the database needed for SGMA implementation.
- Periodic Public workshops will be held to educate stakeholders, well owners and the general public of the ongoing process here in Sonoma County

## WHEN WILL THE PLAN BE IN PLACE?

SGMA provides specific timelines to implement the new requirements. Some key deadlines are below:

Time	Action
June 30, 2017	Formation of GSAs
January 31, 2022	Completion of plans in Sonoma Valley, Petaluma and Santa Rosa Plain basins
January 2042	High- and medium-priority basins achieve sustainability

Local GSA-eligible agencies are committed to meeting these timeframes and, wherever possible, completing the required actions ahead of time.

## WILL STAKEHOLDERS AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC BE INVOLVED IN IMPLEMENTING THE SGMA?

SGMA requires that the GSA-eligible entities notify groundwater users and the general public and hold a public hearing on the formation of the GSA. SGMA also requires the GSA to involve groundwater users and the general public in the development of the GSP. Given the critical role of local agencies, agriculture, the environmental community, and private well owners in the Basin Advisory Panels in Sonoma Valley and Santa Rosa Plain, it is anticipated that diverse stakeholders and the public at large will continue to be involved in implementing SGMA in Sonoma County. Collaboration and stakeholder involvement will be key to the successful implementation of SGMA.

## DOES THE SGMA AFFECT MY WATER RIGHTS?

Section 10720.5 of the SGMA specifies that the act and any groundwater management plans developed as a result of the act do not affect surface or groundwater rights.

## WHO WILL PAY FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SGMA AND ANY PROGRAMS/PROJECTS?

GSA-eligible entities applied for and received (1) a \$250,000 grant from DWR for the creation of a data base and a public data portal and (2) Facilitation Support Services from the State Water Resources Control Board. Both grants are funded by Proposition 1, approved by the voters in November 2014, which will eventually provide \$100 million statewide to fund the implementation of the SGMA. GSA-eligible entities will continue to aggressively pursue this funding and other grant opportunities. The law also allows for the GSAs to collect fees to help pay for the costs of preparing and implementing the GSPs.

### WILL THIS RAISE MY WATER BILL?

Because GSPs have not been written yet, it is not clear what the specific effects of SGMA will be. GSAs may impose fees on groundwater users to help cover the cost of management. Whether fees are imposed and the size of any fees will be decided by the GSA with public input at a later date.

### HOW WILL THE NEW LAW AFFECT ME?

SGMA gives GSAs broad authority to manage groundwater, including authority to increase groundwater supply (for example, projects to increase groundwater recharge or replenishment) and to manage groundwater demand through well monitoring and, if necessary, regulating groundwater extraction. However, SGMA does not authorize GSAs to meter domestic groundwater wells that use less than 2 acre-feet per year (an acre-foot is equivalent to 325,851 gallons or the amount of water it takes to cover an acre with one foot of water. According to the Water Education Foundation, an average California household uses between one-half and one acre-foot of water per year for indoor and outdoor use.) Local agencies also have authority to assess fees for groundwater management.

GSAs in Sonoma County will decide which of these new authorities, if any, are needed to sustainably manage groundwater in each affected basin. Given that the groundwater sustainability process is only beginning, including numerous opportunities for public and well owner input, identifying specific impacts of the new law on well owners is speculative. Once GSAs are formed and plans are adopted, the impacts could vary depending on where your well is located to the amount of water you pump annually; the local groundwater sustainability agency will decide what is necessary to sustainably manage groundwater in its basin.

### WILL SGMA LIMIT HOW MUCH WATER I CAN USE?

Locally developed GSPs will include programs and projects needed for each basin to become sustainable within 20 years. Under SGMA, it is *possible* that a local plan could limit the water pumped by individual well owners who pump more than two-acre feet annually (an acre-foot is equivalent to 325,851 gallons or the amount of water it takes to cover an acre with one foot of water. According to the Water Education Foundation, an average California household uses between one-half and one acre-foot of water per year for indoor and outdoor use.).

**For more information, go to [www.sonomacountygroundwater.org](http://www.sonomacountygroundwater.org). To receive short monthly updates, click on “sign up to receive regular updates.”**