



Estrella-El Pomar-Creston Water District

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February 9, 2023

County of San Luis Obispo
Board of Supervisors
Supervisor and Board Chairperson John Peschong
Supervisor Bruce Gibson
Supervisor Dawn Ortiz-Legg
Supervisor Jimmy Paulding
Supervisor Debbie Arnold

Re: Estrella-El Pomar-Creston Water District becoming a Groundwater Sustainability Agency

Dear Board of Supervisors,

At the District's regular monthly Board Meeting on February 8th, 2023, the Board of Directors voted unanimously to reaffirm the District's interest in being a Groundwater Sustainability Agency (GSA) and to request that the San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors consider relinquishing GSA authority over the lands within the Estrella-El Pomar-Creston Water District's boundary. The Estrella-El Pomar-Creston Water District (EPCWD) became a fully qualified California Water District in December 2017 and met the deadline the County set in its Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) Strategy dated March 7, 2017. On March 6, 2018, the SLO County Board of Supervisors voted to not withdraw from serving as the GSA over the lands within the EPCWD's boundary, thus denying EPCWD the ability to become a GSA under the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA). EPCWD is recognized as a potential member of the Memorandum of Agreement, the governing document of the Paso Robles Groundwater Basin SGMA/GSP Process.

Since January 2018, EPCWD has functioned as a California Water District holding monthly Board Meetings and meeting the legal requirements of being a public agency. Our members joined the District voluntarily, "opt-in", and the District has 199 active members which include 201 rural residences. Over the course of five years, the District has collected \$594,000 in assessments.

In addition to the legal requirements of a California Water District, EPCWD has fulfilled many of the duties that would be consider normal functions of a GSA. A list of the District's major activities is detailed below.

1. The Paso Basin GSP included only 22 RMS monitoring wells. This number is considered inadequate and the County indicated that they had limited funding for well monitoring. EPCWD recognized this shortcoming and started a program, at its own expense, two years ago to enhance groundwater level monitoring. The District has now completed its second year of monitoring groundwater levels, sampling four times a year. The District has 26 wells in its database. It is expected that these wells will be included the Paso Basin's SGMA Process.

2. EPCWD co-sponsored along with the Shandon-San Juan Water District a study of groundwater recharge options within the Basin, identifying locations where recharge could be put to good effect to help reach sustainability.
3. EPCWD co-sponsored along with the Shandon-San Juan Water District a group meeting with 50 farmers and rural residents to discuss GSP Development. Montgomery and Associates presented information on the current status of the GSP and offered opportunities for landowner input at the meeting.
4. EPCWD co-sponsored along with the Shandon-San Juan Water District four study sessions to review in detail various chapters of the GSP.
5. EPCWD funded along with several partners an Economic Impact Study conducted by CalPoly University on the effect of various levels of pumping cutbacks on communities and other entities so that the true cost of removing productive irrigated farming capacity was clearly understood. This can help us understand what we might be able to afford for projects and additional supply. This was a SGMA mandated requirement, yet it was not included in the GSP. The Districts along with their partners independently financed and published the study results.
6. EPCWD conducted a study with a licensed engineering firm to see how a conjunctive use project might utilize unallocated State Water, reserved and paid for annually by taxpayers but not utilized, to mitigate shortfalls. This primarily impacted the EPCWD area so it was quite pertinent.
7. Blaine Reely has attended numerous EPCWD Board meetings where there has been a free exchange of ideas between attendees.
8. EPCWD Board members along with landowner members of the District have been supporting the Blended Water Project led by the efforts of Jerry Lohr and others.
9. EPCWD developed along with SSJWD a 3-D model of the Basin using the SkyTEM aerial survey data.
10. The District will be installing continuous groundwater level monitoring sensors in two landowner wells. These sensors will have full telemetry to monitor groundwater levels in real time.
11. The District purchased the equipment necessary to establish the first CIMIS Weather Station in the Basin.
12. The District retained an independent licensed engineering firm to provide District input and feedback to the Paso Basin Cooperative Committee during GSP preparation and the District continues to retain the engineering firm to consult and advise the District.

As the GSAs move the SGMA/GSP process forward to the implementation phase, the issue of domestic wells going dry and rural residents' access to groundwater will become center stage and one of the most important issues the GSAs will have to deal with.

The high density, rural residential areas of the Jardine Road Area, Ground Squirrel Hollow and the four other areas around Union Road, Branch Road and Geneseo contain over 1,300 rural residents all accessing groundwater. In a letter from DWR to the Paso Basin Groundwater Sustainability Agencies in

June 2021, DWR states, “chronic lowering of groundwater levels is one that significantly and unreasonably impacts the ability of existing domestic wells of average depth to produce adequate water for domestic purposes, causes significant financial burden to those who rely on the groundwater basin, or interferes with other SGMA sustainability indicators.”

These areas are at the center of EPCWD’s sphere of influence. The District feels that we are uniquely positioned to support the efforts necessary to insure a sustainable Basin and provide equal access to groundwater. Reducing chronic lowering of groundwater levels will have to include actions supported by agricultural pumpers. Agricultural pumping in the Basin accounts for 90% of groundwater extraction. EPCWD represents 42% of agricultural pumpers while Shandon-San Juan Water District represents 33% of pumpers and the County’s white area, not including EPCWD’s members, represents 25% of pumpers.

The primary purpose of the formation of The Estrella-El Pomar-Creston Water District was to participate in the SGMA Process as a GSA. Over the last five years, the District has demonstrated its ability to contribute to the SGMA Process. As the GSAs move into the implementation phase of the GSP, the Estrella-El Pomar-Creston Water District would like to participate as a GSA member.

The Estrella-El Pomar-Creston Water District asks that the San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors consider relinquishing its GSA authority over the areas covered by EPCWD thus allowing EPCWD to request that DWR designate EPCWD as a Groundwater Sustainability Agency.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dana Merrill", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Dana M. Merrill
President, Estrella-El Pomar-Creston Water District