

PASO ROBLES AREA GROUNDWATER AUTHORITY

To: Board of Directors

From: Taylor Blakslee / Steve Sinton

Date: October 22, 2025

Subject: Agenda Item #7 – Presentation from Regional Groundwater Stakeholder Group

Recommendation

None; information only.

Discussion

Following the Proposition 218 protest in August 2025, a group of regional groundwater stakeholders convened to discuss challenges related to basin funding and governance under the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA).

The group, facilitated by Steve Sinton, included landowners, agricultural representatives, and individuals with differing perspectives on the prior funding/governance effort.

The summary from the group's findings and proposed recommendations is provided as **Attachment 1** for the Board's consideration and discussion.

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From: Steve Sinton

Date: 10-15-2025

A group of invited overlying landowners and stakeholders met twice for several hours to address the issues arising from the failure of the Prop 218 vote. The group included several landowners who opposed the Prop 218 proposal. The following is based on consensus among those landowners and stakeholders about how the GSAs and the Board of PRAGA should proceed.

MISSION

Our committee agrees that the governing entity needs to be focused on SGMA compliance. Things like projects should be left to other entities to pursue.

OUTREACH & RESPONSIVENESS

We agreed that communication was hugely insufficient on the need for a JPA, the need for a larger budget and what GSA responsibilities would be turned over to the JPA. None of the entities involved have successfully eliminated confusion over the requirements of SGMA, what the GSAs really do or how they function, or why any of this is necessary. Even when interested landowners sought clarification and specifics about the 218 proposal, they felt that their interests and concerns were not addressed. It is also a concern that the County GSA never held a meeting where its constituent irrigators could ask questions or express concerns and frustrations.

While the mechanism for effective outreach remains unclear, the need is glaring. We need a concrete and effective strategy on how to improve the understanding of everything to do with SGMA and our governing agencies. Furthermore, anyone who seeks information needs to receive a clear and complete answer. Without that, trust will remain low and additional support beyond reach.

Previous efforts at outreach going back to the effort to create one water district for the entire basin have been failures. Our committee consulted with an outside experts on SGMA and were told that we need at least 10 face to face meetings with a brief PowerPoint presentation on the law, the Department of Water Resources determination that we are in critical overdraft, how that impacts all of us (regardless of what you may think is the real condition of the Basin), and what that requires of us. We need to emphasize that surrendering our management to the State will be expensive and still not relieve us from the obligation to bring the Basin into sustainability. We need to explain the economic impact of simply cutting pumping to meet sustainability. Following that, we were advised to continue each meeting in a workshop or study session format with staff and consultants answering most questions. While workshops have not been effective in the past and we know that there will continue to be campaigns of misinformation, we don't have good alternatives to convey what we are required to do.

FINANCIAL

We agreed that the budget for whatever entity ends up governing the basin should be for the minimum necessary to comply with SGMA*. We also agreed that it should finish three existing activities:

- 1) the MILR following program, even if it requires some funding beyond the available grant funds;
- 2) the work of Land IQ, with easy access to the data, so we know how much water is being used;
- 3) well monitoring and an effective way of allowing access to water level information to landowners, the State and the public.

These three items are seen not as projects, but as necessary programs to allow us to understand and report what is really happening in the Basin.

Finally, provide details on exactly what are the expected costs of the appropriate activities for this entity.

Until a new management entity is established, expenses should be kept to a minimum and funding from the four GSAs should be clarified. Outside services should be retained only as necessary to meet the core mission. Efforts to produce a new budget should be put on hold, except to the extent necessary to explain during outreach the costs that it will take to achieve the core responsibilities of the management entity.

Independently, there is the question of who should have the financial responsibility for getting the Basin to sustainability. While there may be a temptation to excuse those most likely to oppose future funding efforts, the right approach is to include everyone who uses the groundwater with the right to have a voice in groundwater management decisions. The amount of financial contribution should logically be adjusted to reflect water use and future benefit. Based on that, de minimis users should only expect to pay a minimal amount, but still have an opportunity to effectively participate in the management of the basin. Those users include owners of rural residential properties and grazing lands. Irrigated agricultural users will necessarily pay most of the costs of groundwater management and therefore need sufficient representation that they can prevent management decisions that are unfair, inappropriate or too expensive for irrigated agriculture.

MANAGEMENT

We have concluded that a new entity should be created to replace PRAGA. This is based on the loss of trust in the current JPA and its limited governing structure. This new entity should only be agreed upon after patient and full discussion of a new governing structure and clear vision of what will be done. This must start with reaching out to as many people as possible through informative workshops that include the opportunity for genuine input and any other contact, such as open house opportunities with staff, consultants or GSA Board members. We need to take the time necessary to develop understanding and at minimum, a clear consensus of is needed. We agreed that a Proposition 26 approach to funding will seriously harden opposition to the necessary work of bringing the basin into sustainability.

We have agreed that the management entity should be a coalition with more inclusive representation that is dedicated to balancing the Basin. The structure of that will be difficult, but we believe that when qualified candidates (own property over the groundwater basin) are available, the board should include someone from ranching, as that is the largest land use overlying the Basin, and rural residential landowners, who face the greatest risk from groundwater declines. Agricultural organizations should be represented. Unless the management is under a single, unified GSA, there should be at least one representative from each involved GSA, and possibly two representatives, but those representatives shouldn't have to be an elected person. Irrigated agriculture should have a majority of its representatives personally engaged in farming.

Based on internal discussions and the guidance of the outside resources, we believe that the new management entity should create advisory committees of stakeholders. The committees could consist of de minimis users, non-irrigated agriculture, irrigated agriculture or some combination of those and others. The point is to give overlying landowners a real voice, so perhaps each advisory committee could have one seat on the governing Board. The Board's staff would presumably coordinate with the advisory committees to ensure good communication. We also believe that the Board needs to give its staff's advice great weight and any decisions made that differ significantly from that advice should be openly and thoroughly explained.

Some remaining questions:

What do we think would be the best management structure – one GSA, go back to something like the coordinating committee, or something like the JPA with more representative and responsive governance? Most of the State has gone with the JPA approach and we think that it is acceptable if reconstituted to be more inclusive. However, the use of "JPA" has become a lightning rod and must be replaced.

*On the budget, what is our tolerance for a cushion to cover unexpected expenses? What do we mean by complying with SGMA? Can we fully achieve sustainability, including bringing the basin into balance, with a budget that is limited to MILR and filing the necessary reports? If not, are we willing to accept cutbacks in pumping? Those questions should be raised with the stakeholders before any decisions are made by the Board.