



Michael Winn Sue Luft Courtney Howard
Chairperson **Vice Chairperson** **Secretary**
Room 207, County Government Center PH (805) 781-1016
San Luis Obispo CA 93401 FAX (805) 788-2182

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Golden State Water

December 7, 2010

Honorable Frank Mecham
Chairperson, Board of Supervisors
County of San Luis Obispo
976 Osos Street
San Luis Obispo, CA 93408-2040

Subject: Water Resources Advisory Committee Comments on the Paso
 Robles Groundwater Basin Resource Capacity Study

Dear Chairperson Mecham:

On June 2, 2010, the Water Resources Advisory Committee (WRAC) formed an ad hoc subcommittee to review the Paso Robles Groundwater Basin Resource Capacity Study (RCS). On November 18, 2010, the Subcommittee, Department of Planning and Building staff and Public Works Department staff met to review the October 2010 draft RCS. On December 1, 2010, the WRAC reviewed the ad hoc subcommittee's comments on the draft RCS and voted with only one (1) No vote to submit the attached comments to you for further consideration.

Ad hoc subcommittee members included Member Sue Luft (Environmental At-Large), Member Della Barrett (District 5), Alternate Member Keith Larson (El Paso de Robles), Member John Neil (Atascadero Mutual Water Company), Member Steve Sinton (District 1), Member Russ Thompson (City of Atascadero), Chairperson Mike Winn (District 4), and Member Lowell Zelinski (Agriculture At-Large). Member Luft served as subcommittee chair.

Respectfully,

MICHAEL WINN
Chairperson, Water Resources Advisory Committee

cc: SLO County Board of Supervisors
 SLO County Planning Commission
 James Caruso, County Department of Planning and Building

Attachment: Paso Robles Groundwater Basin RCS Subcommittee Report

Purpose of the Committee:

To advise the County Board of Supervisors concerning all policy decisions relating to the water resources of the SLO County Flood Control & Water Conservation District. To recommend to the Board specific water resource programs. To recommend methods of financing water resource programs.

Excerpts from WRAC By-Laws dated 3/6/07

WRAC Subcommittee to Review Paso Robles Groundwater Basin Resource Capacity Study
Report to WRAC
November 23, 2010
As Approved by WRAC on December 1, 2010

Meeting: November 18, 2010, 9:00 to 11:30 a.m.

Purpose: Review and comment on Paso Robles Groundwater Basin Resource Capacity Study,
Revised October 2010

Subcommittee members:

Della Barrett, District 5 – unable to attend meeting
Keith Larson, City of Paso Robles
John Neil, Atascadero Mutual Water Company
Steve Sinton, District 1 – unable to attend meeting
Russ Thompson, City of Atascadero
Mike Winn, WRAC Chair, District 4
Lowell Zelinski, Agriculture at Large – unable to attend meeting
Sue Luft, Environmental at Large, Subcommittee Chair

Other attendees:

James Caruso, SLO County Planning
Courtney Howard, SLO County Public Works

Process: After the November 18th meeting, the subcommittee chair drafted a report based on the subcommittee discussion. This draft report was reviewed and approved via email by the subcommittee members.

Summary:

The subcommittee unanimously commended the Board of Supervisors for keeping the Levels of Severity in the Resource Management System annual reports solidly grounded in data and based solely on the County's established criteria for the LOS designations.

Subcommittee members discussed the revised Paso Robles Groundwater Basin Resource Capacity Study (Paso Basin RCS) and further draft revisions that were presented by staff. A consensus was reached on the following comments regarding the revised Paso Basin RCS.

The subcommittee continues to unanimously support the designation of LOS III for the main Paso Robles Groundwater Basin, since the definition of LOS III is clearly met. Sustained water level declines are widespread throughout the portions of the basin having significant groundwater use.

The subcommittee does not believe that separate recommendations for the Estrella/Creston Area of Concern are practical since the boundaries of this area have greatly expanded and will continue to change and pumping within any part of the groundwater basin affects other portions of the basin. In addition, pumping is currently at the perennial yield for the entire basin.

After discussion of the status of the Atascadero Sub-basin, the subcommittee agrees with staff's preliminary decision to recommend a LOS I for the Atascadero Sub-basin, as outlined below.

Detailed Discussion:

Main Paso Robles Groundwater Basin

Subcommittee members have reviewed the various studies of the Paso Robles Groundwater Basin, including the peer review of those studies. These reports and the testimony provided by the experts at the joint SLO County Board of Supervisors / Planning Commission hearing on November 9, 2010 clearly indicate that the main basin is at or near its safe yield. Well levels throughout the majority of the basin have declined over the past 13 years (1997 through 2009), as shown on the attached figure.

During the joint BoS/PC hearing, Paul Sorensen, the lead hydrogeologist on many of the basin studies, addressed the question of why the water balance shows that the perennial yield has not been reached, **although** well levels are continuing to decline. Paul explained there are three possible reasons for this: the perennial yield estimate may be too high, pumping estimates may be too low, or groundwater data in some outlying areas of the basin is lacking. He further stated that if the groundwater data gaps were filled, the conclusions would not change, because there have not been any dramatically increasing well levels elsewhere in the basin. Both Iris Priestaf of Todd Engineers, who authored some of the basin reports, and Gus Yates, who performed the peer review, stated that there are well declines throughout much of the basin and the data overwhelmingly point to the need for immediate action to avoid overdrawing the groundwater basin.

The various scenarios in the draft Resource Capacity Study show that total outflows from the basin will exceed total inflows from as early as 2011 to as late as 2025. In these scenarios, the differential between the total outflow and the safe yield may become as high as 20,000 to 50,000 acre-ft per year. None of these scenarios are adjusted for the possibility that the safe yield may in fact be overestimated.

County staff in their presentations and in the staff report discussed the only two sources of supplemental water in the basin. The first is more efficient use of water extracted from the basin. The second source is unallocated water available from the Nacimiento Project and the State Water Project. Only 6095 acre-ft/year of unallocated water is available from the Nacimiento Project, which most likely will be purchased in the future by existing participants in the project. The State Water Project has over 15,000 acre-ft/year of unallocated water. Use of this excess allocation is being studied in the Master Water Plan and is impacted by the complexities of State Water reliability issues, infrastructure constraints, and contractual and financial considerations.

An LOS III can be established if the dependable supply will be depleted before new supplies are developed. Based on the facts of the situation, the dependable supply of the main Paso Robles Groundwater Basin will be depleted before new supplies can be developed.

The subcommittee continues to support the designation of LOS III for the main Paso Robles Groundwater Basin, since the LOS III criteria is met, and requests that a LOS III be adopted and certified for the main basin.

Estrella/Creston Area of Concern

The subcommittee believes that the data supports an LOS III for the entire main Paso basin, not just the Estrella/Creston Area of Concern. This area of concern was originally defined as the area where groundwater levels had declined significantly during the period 1980 through 1997. The boundaries of the Estrella/Creston Area of Concern have greatly expanded laterally and in depth since the area was defined.

Studies regarding the Paso Robles Groundwater Basin indicate that pumping in one area of the basin will impact well levels in other portions of the basin. Therefore, groundwater management strategies must be implemented throughout the basin.

Based on these facts, the subcommittee recommends that the Estrella/Creston Area of Concern not be managed differently from the main basin, but still mapped regularly.

Atascadero Sub-basin

With regards to the Atascadero Sub-basin, a preliminary determination has been made by County Planning Department that an LOS I designation is supported by the data. This determination is based on the following facts:

- It will be approximately nine years until the perennial yield is reached (2019).
- 60% of the pumping in the sub-basin is by three municipal pumpers. These entities can manage the sub-basin better than the thousands of users in the main basin. The water purveyors within the Atascadero Sub-basin have the ability to purchase additional Nacimiento project water, increase and enforce conservation measures, and otherwise manage the water resources to respond rapidly to changes in groundwater levels within their service areas.
- Approximately half of the pumping is from the Salinas River alluvium. Pumping from this shallower part of the basin does not have the same effect on groundwater levels as does pumping from the deeper Paso Robles formation.
- The Atascadero Sub-basin is pumped differently than the main basin. In times of drought, main basin pumping increases, while the municipal sector can decrease pumping in the sub-basin either by using supplemental water and/or increasing water conservation efforts.
- Atascadero Mutual Water Company (AMWC), Templeton Community Services District, and the City of Paso Robles all have policies prohibiting and/or restricting new groundwater wells within their service areas.
- The subcommittee's recommendation regarding a determination of adequate water resources (discussed below) should reduce the impact on the sub-basin of increased water demands outside the water purveyor's service area.

The subcommittee supports the LOS I designation for the Atascadero Sub-basin based on the above-listed considerations with inclusion of the land use actions for the Atascadero Sub-basin listed below.

Recommended Monitoring Actions

Staff has provided draft language regarding groundwater monitoring actions, as follows:

Recommended Monitoring Actions

1. The County should initiate the development of a groundwater monitoring program for approval by the Board of Supervisors and with elements that can be adopted by ordinance. The program should, at a minimum, address groundwater level and usage data collection. Effort to develop the program should include town-hall meetings to ensure stakeholder involvement. Issues to be addressed during the development of the program would include, but not be limited to, gaps in the existing monitoring network, voluntary versus non-voluntary participation, distinguishing how different users (urban, agricultural, rural) would be involved/affected/not affected, education and outreach, understanding what other amendments to County Code related to groundwater data collection are being developed, and the legal authorities of the County/Flood Control and Water Conservation District (District). The program should be consistent with the following:
 - a. California Statewide Groundwater Elevations Monitoring Program (CASGEM – Senate Bill X7 6)

- b. District and stakeholder efforts on the Groundwater Management Plan now under preparation.
 - c. The Countywide Master Water Plan
 - d. Current monitoring programs of the Department of Public Works
2. The County should continue studies of the groundwater basin and stakeholder coordination efforts including the update and improvement of the numerical groundwater model and establishing a mechanism to fund these ongoing efforts (e.g. zone of benefit; groundwater district).

The majority of the subcommittee supports these recommended monitoring actions, with the following additions (which were part of the previous draft RCS):

- The District will continue to conduct biannual groundwater measurements to chart the scope of groundwater level changes.
- Title 8 of the County Code will be amended in accordance with the recommendations in the Resource Management System Annual Summary Report.
- The County will require that the new wells be a part of the District groundwater level measuring program if needed.
- The County will develop and implement, in collaboration with other water purveyors within the Paso Robles Groundwater Basin and the Atascadero Sub-basin, a water conservation outreach and education program for the rural area. The outreach program will inform rural groundwater users of the state of the basin, include suggested conservation and efficiency measures, and if possible, provide incentives to water conservation and efficiency efforts.

Recommended Land Use Actions

Staff has recommended the following land use actions in the Resource Capacity Study for the main Paso Robles Groundwater Basin:

Recommended Land Use Actions

1. In urban areas that do not have access to supplemental water (e.g. Nacimiento Project water), require new discretionary development that uses groundwater to use best management practices for water conservation and offset 100 percent of its new water use with non-agricultural water. In urban areas of the basin that do have access to supplemental water, no land use restrictions are imposed by this RCS.
2. In unincorporated rural areas of the basin, do not approve General Plan amendments that result in a net increase in the non-agricultural use of groundwater; in any case, prohibit new land divisions in the rural areas of the basin. All discretionary development shall offset water use with non agricultural water.
3. New wineries shall use best management practices consistent with the BMP's identified in Attachment 14.
4. Revise the Growth Management Ordinance and the Resource Management System to substantially limit yearly non-agricultural development in the rural areas of the basin.
5. The Department shall work with stakeholders to develop best management practices for prevalent land uses in the basin similar to the winery BMP developed by the Paso Robles Wine County Alliance.

The subcommittee supports these recommendations with the following revisions:

- Include a definition of “urban” as areas within the Urban Reserve Line of a community, as defined by SLO County and LAFCO, and, for Atascadero, the area within the Atascadero Mutual Water Company's service area (which includes the original Atascadero Colony boundaries.). “Rural” refers to parcels outside the urban areas.
- Item 1 above should be revised to state: “In urban areas that do not have access to supplemental water (e.g. Nacimiento Project water or State Water Project water), require new discretionary development that uses groundwater to use the California Urban Water Conservation Council (CUWCC) best management practices for water conservation and offset 100 percent of its new water use with non-agricultural water.”
- Item 2 above should be revised to state: “In urban areas of the Paso Robles Groundwater Basin, including LAFCO Spheres of Influence for incorporated cities, that do have access to supplemental water, no land use restrictions are recommended by this Resource Capacity Study if the development application is accompanied by a “Will Serve” letter from a water purveyor that has access to supplemental water.”
- Item 3 above should be revised to state: “In unincorporated rural areas of the basin, do not approve General Plan amendments that result in a net increase in the non-agricultural use of groundwater; in any case, prohibit new land divisions in the rural areas of the basin. All discretionary development, excluding wineries that comply with 4 below, shall offset water use with non agricultural water.”
- Item 5 above should be revised to state: “Revise the Growth Management Ordinance, the Resource Management System and the Land Use and Circulation Element/Rural Area Plan to substantially limit yearly non-agricultural development in the rural areas of the basin.”
- Item 6 above should be revised to name the County instead of the Department.
- Add the following: “General Plan amendments and land divisions in the unincorporated rural areas of the Atascadero Sub-basin that result in a net increase in the non-agricultural use of water must prove adequate long term water resources for the proposed project.”
- Add the following: “The County will develop a model landscape ordinance that will limit that amount of turf and other high-water use features on all parcels within the Paso Robles Groundwater Basin, including the Atascadero Sub-basin.”

The majority of the subcommittee supports the following revision:

- Item 3 should be revised to state: "In unincorporated rural areas of the basin, do not approve General Plan amendments that result in a net increase in the non-agricultural use of groundwater. New subdivisions of land in the rural areas (as defined above) of the main Paso Robles Groundwater Basin are prohibited. All discretionary development, excluding wineries that comply with 4 below, shall offset water use with non-agricultural water."