

# First Step In California Groundwater Law Stirs Debate

**Amy Quinton, Capital Public Radio, 6-16-16**

Two years ago, California became one of the last states in the West to pass a law to manage groundwater. The political will to do so took decades. But the bigger battle may be putting the law into practice.

Paso Robles in San Luis Obispo County may be a perfect example of how hard it's going to be.

The region is known mostly for it's more than 200 wineries. But amidst the rolling hills full of vineyards, it's not unusual to see tanker trucks delivering water to rural homeowners whose wells have run dry.

Stephen Johansen with Crocker Water is filling storage tanks for one rural homeowner. He says business is booming.

"Within the last two months we've had probably more than 20 customers added on to our weekly delivery list," says Johansen. "There's no water here."

Right next door, Sue Luft, a retired environmental engineer, started to see her well fail before the drought even started.

"We had a good well, 135 feet to groundwater. Now we're down at 285 feet, a new well, extremely poor quality water," says Luft.

Luft has spent about \$30,000 drilling a new well that's pulling up water from so deep it's full of sulfur.

"They drilled. They drilled. They drilled," says Luft, pointing up the road to her neighbors who have also had water supply problems. "Those guys kept dropping their pumps. He's only watering part of the vineyard at a time 'cause he can't keep up anymore."

Water levels in the Paso Robles basin have dropped more than 100 feet in some areas. More water is now pumped out of the basin every year than can be replenished.

The state has deemed the basin in "Critical Overdraft" under the new Sustainable Groundwater Management Act – or SGMA. One of the first steps of that law requires the creation of a local agency by next year. These Groundwater Sustainability Agencies would be charged with coming up with a plan to manage the basin.

"Based upon the SGMA requirements, you're going to have to manage this basin. It has to be managed," says Frank Meacham with the San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors. "How that's managed, who manages it, the cost involved in that, those are still all trying to be put together."

Back before the state's new law, San Luis Obispo County appeared to be well on the way to managing groundwater.

In 2013, the county prevented new vineyard or crop plantings unless groundwater demand remained the same. Large vineyard owners and rural homeowners came together to form a local groundwater management district right about the same time the state's groundwater law passed.

“We were doing exactly what the state wanted people to do, which is local people take responsibility for their groundwater,” says Jerry Reaugh, a former vineyard owner that supported the proposal.

But when they put the local district plan to a vote, more than 70 percent of voters in the Paso Robles Basin rejected it.

High on a hillside just outside of Paso Robles, Jacqueline Plant-Mason walks among the 40 acres of wine grapes she grows. She opposed the water district.

"When you have this quote 'water district,' it's another layer of government. That's all it is. It's another layer of control," says Plant-Mason.

Plant-Mason and hundreds of other landowners have sued. They believe a court should decide how to manage the groundwater basin.

Greg Grewall led the opposition to the local district. He doesn't even believe the basin is critically overdrafted.

“The other basins included on the list have major significant problems. We don't have a significant issue,” says Grewall.

The arguments against the local water district became ugly, with rumors circulating about a plot by big agriculture to steal water.

“I think there was a tremendous amount of character assassination during this campaigning. There were a tremendous amount of conspiracy issues that were out there,” says Frank Meacham with the San Luis Obispo Board of Supervisors. "I just can't deal with a lot of that."

Regardless of why the election went the way it did, state law will require San Luis Obispo County come up with a solution.

Otherwise, state regulators can take over, meter wells, and charge fees – all without voter approval.

*This is the first of a two-part series on managing California's groundwater.*