



AB 252 – SGMA-Related Land Repurposing

SUMMARY

Under existing law, the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), local Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSAs) around the state must ensure that water users are not pumping groundwater for irrigation or other uses faster than the local groundwater basin can refill. To do this, significant amounts of farmland in certain regions will need to be taken out of production in order to reduce water demand and protect local groundwater basins.

Assembly Bill 252, by Assemblymembers Robert Rivas and Rudy Salas, will ensure that the state is minimizing the harm and maximizing the benefits of SGMA-related land conversion. Specifically, this bill will create a pilot program to support repurposing formerly irrigated agricultural land for groundwater recharge, biodiversity conservation, pollinator habitat, cattle grazing, and other beneficial and less water-intensive uses.

BACKGROUND

During the drought of the early 2010s, the capacity of many conventional water sources such as rivers, lakes, and reservoirs declined substantially. Many water users needed more water than was available from conventional sources to irrigate crops and provide drinking water. As a result, groundwater pumping increased exponentially.

Because pumped groundwater was often attractively cheap and reliable compared to other water sources, a large number of groundwater basins were soon losing water to pumping at a rate faster than they could refill. Groundwater supplies quickly declined, leaving people and ecosystems with less or no access to drinking, agricultural, and environmental water. In addition, once groundwater levels decline, the land often settles into the underground space the water had previously occupied. This permanently reduces the groundwater basin's ability to store water and can affect the capacity of canals and other water infrastructure by causing them to buckle where land has sunk underneath them.

In 2014, the Legislature passed, and the Governor signed, a set of bills collectively known as SGMA. These bills required sustainable management of all groundwater basins in the state and would be sustainably managed to ensure that they are not pumped faster than they can refill. Implementation of SGMA is ongoing.

PROBLEM

Under even the most optimistic scenarios, roughly half a million acres of farmland will have to be taken out of production in the San Joaquin Valley alone in order to bring groundwater basins into compliance with SGMA. Without a plan, farmland is likely to be taken out of production in a patchwork that will create sources of invasive weeds, pests, and dust in between active farms, reducing neighboring farms' profitability, impairing air quality, and providing little benefit to society. Additionally, without compensation for retiring productive lands, farmers that rely on these lands for their livelihoods will bear the brunt of the economic impacts of reduced productivity.

SOLUTION

A strategic approach is needed to ensure that SGMA-related land conversion has minimal impacts on agricultural productivity and local communities. It will also be needed to ensure that previously irrigated land provides other benefits to society, such as groundwater recharge, recreation, or habitat for wildlife or pollinators, rather than merely sitting idle.

AB 252 will create the Multibenefit Land Repurposing Incentive Program within the Department of Conservation. This pilot program will provide grants to Groundwater Sustainability Agencies, counties, local NGOs, and others to develop and implement local programs aimed at repurposing previously irrigated land. With support from this program, local GSAs can move closer toward achieving groundwater sustainability as farmers are incentivized via payments to repurpose irrigated lands to create new benefits for their communities and the environment.

SUPPORT

- Environmental Defense Fund (sponsor)

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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