

April 12, 2016

The Good, The Bad and The Ugly: Where Do We Stand in the Quest for Sustainable Groundwater Management?

At the intersection of water and politics, a cross section of water professionals including agency staff, engineers, attorneys and consultants convened in Sacramento March 30 to spend a day with an outstanding lineup of legislators and administration officials at the **Groundwater Resources Association** (GRA) and **California Groundwater Coalition's** (CGC) **Annual Legislative Symposium**. The title of this year's symposium was "California's Quest for Sustainable Groundwater Supplies: Marching Ahead," offering an up-to-the-minute report on Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) implementation along with speakers addressing the full range of today's most pressing issues facing water managers and professionals.

The symposium featured eight legislators from both sides of the aisle, offering unique insights into the California Legislature's outlook on groundwater issues this session. Among the many bills discussed was how to facilitate a statewide water rights exchange. Two legislators highlighted companion bills, AB 1755 (Dodd) and AB 2304 (Levine), that would create a publicly accessible, online clearinghouse for water rights data and establish a five-member board within the Natural Resources Agency to oversee a California Water Market Exchange.

Gary Bardini and David Gutierrez from the Department of Water Resources (DWR) advised attendees to expect to see in 2016 a guideline to local agencies on Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSA) best management practices. After hearing comments on sections that are not clear within SGMA, the DWR team made it clear that the department is going to help locals be successful by making the department more approachable during the GSA formation period. The goal, they said, is to aim for substantial compliance and sustainability, not to just engage in process.

Top administration officials also offered insights into what we are likely to see from Gov. Brown's administration this year. Secretary of Natural Resources John Laird spoke about the Cal Water Fix and the tough choices the administration is poised to make in the coming year. Gov. Brown's legislative affairs secretary for environment, energy, water, and agriculture, Martha Guzman-Aceves, gave an update on the budget process and fielded tough inquiries about additional funding for SGMA implementation.

In a dynamic session, the SGMA program manager for the DWR, Trevor Joseph, gave an overview of the proposed Groundwater Sustainability Plan regulations and shared the floor with several panelists offering critiques and concerns. Common themes were funding challenges, water affordability, and questions about how to square SGMA's enforcement "teeth" with its codified promise not to impact existing water rights. Issues with groundwater fees under Proposition 26 and Proposition 218 also loomed large throughout the day.

For those looking for funding, Daniel Curtin, of the California Water Commission, reminded the room that the commission is looking at concept papers for \$2.4 billion in funding for the public benefit of water storage. In addition to the commission's funding, Commissioner Curtin discussed SB 628, which was passed by the California Legislature and signed into law by Gov. Brown in 2014, authorizing the creation of enhanced infrastructure financing districts (EIFDs), allowing a new working relationship to be established among the public, private and nonprofit sectors. EIFDs are designed to alleviate local governments' continued struggle to find ways to meet the

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state's backlog of infrastructure needs, including water, and to play an important role in creating sustainable prosperity by integrating solutions to a diverse set of infrastructure challenges with a new array of funding streams.

The symposium is an excellent example of the important role the CGC and GRA play, facilitating connections between water professionals and top legislative and administration decision-makers. Both organizations have played a central role in guiding groundwater policy in the state.

CGC members have access to coordinated lobbying efforts, bill tracking, and collaboration with an engaged group of water professionals for one annual membership fee. For more information on becoming a CGC member, visit CGC's [website](#).

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