



Stakeholder Assessment Summary Report:

Recommendations on a Stakeholder Engagement Process for the GSA Formation Requirement of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act in the Solano Subbasin

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Overview

The State of California passed the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) in 2014, and designated one groundwater basin in Solano County as medium priority: the Solano Subbasin of the larger Sacramento Valley Groundwater Basin. The SGMA requires that medium and high priority basins form a groundwater sustainability agency (GSA) by June 30, 2017, and develop a groundwater sustainability plan (GSP) by January 31, 2022 to ensure that they are operated within their sustainable yield, without causing undesirable results. The Solano County Water Agency (SCWA) has contracted with Ag Innovations to develop an educational process and convene a stakeholder engagement process to allow for the effective participation of the agricultural and landowner communities in the development of a GSA in the Solano Subbasin. Ag Innovations conducted interviews with nine thought-leaders from the agricultural and water management communities as a first step in designing an appropriate stakeholder engagement process. Interview results have been synthesized in this report, organized by eight different core questions.

Key Acronyms:

GSA = Groundwater Sustainability Agency

SGMA = Sustainable Groundwater Management Act

SCWA = Solano County Water Agency

SID = Solano Irrigation District

Interview Methods

Phone interviews with nine opinion leaders having direct experience with local agriculture or water resources management in the Solano County subbasin were conducted by Lucas Patzek and Brooking Gatewood of Ag Innovations between October 22, 2015 and November 9, 2015. Each interview was 1-1.5

hours in length, and interview guides were developed by Ag Innovations staff with guidance from SCWA staff.

Interview Questions

I. Key Stakeholders

- Who are the stakeholders that should be engaged in the SGMA implementation conversations?
- Who can help with ag outreach?
- Who are the key bridge-builders and influencers in the community?

II. Best Practices for Stakeholder Engagement

- What kinds of stakeholder engagement processes have worked in your community in the past?
- What are some critical events in the community over the next year that we need to be aware of, and that we might piggyback on to improve our stakeholder reach?
- What types of SGMA information would be good to share with public stakeholders?
- When and where would work best for in person meetings for your constituency?

III. Perceived Challenges Relating to Water Management and Governance

- Where are the key points of conflict within the community? Who do we need to go and “tend fences” with?
- What groundwater trends do you see on the ground? Are there areas of greater concern than others?

Summary of Results

Section 1: Key Stakeholders

Most interviewees agreed that the local agencies overlying the subbasin with water supply, water management, or land use responsibilities should be involved in the GSA formation conversations, including Solano County, the Solano County Water Agency, key cities (Dixon, Rio Vista, Vacaville, and possibly Davis), and water and irrigation districts (Solano Irrigation District, Reclamation District 2068, Rural North Vacaville Water District, Maine Prairie Water District, and the Solano County Water District). A number of interviewees also suggested that Yolo and Sacramento Counties remain involved. SGMA implementation conversations should also involve well-operators, including farmers and ranchers, food processors, the National Cemetery, Travis Air Force Base, and UC Davis.

The most comprehensive list for reaching land-owners by mail will come from the County’s Tax Assessor. A more distributed outreach approach will work best for virtual communications. Several local organizations maintain email lists that will be important for outreach, including: the list of enrollees in the Irrigated Lands Program managed by the Dixon RCD, the participants in the Pesticide Permit Program managed by the Ag Commissioner’s office, as well as the rate-payers with the Solano Irrigation District, Reclamation District 2068, and Maine Prairie Water District. It will be important to maintain continuous communication with a number of key farming organizations, including: the three local Farm Bureau offices in Solano, Yolo, and Sacramento Counties, the Solano County Ag Advisory Committee, Solano Land Trust,

the Napa Solano Cattleman's Association, smaller food and farming groups (e.g., Solano Grown, farmer's markets). The facilitation team can piggyback on regular meetings of groups like the Ag Advisory Committee, the Farm Bureaus, the Cattleman's Association, pesticide permitting workshops, etc. to disseminate information and solicit stakeholder input.

Interviewees shared names of key bridge-builders and influencers working in agencies in the local community, as well as vocal and trusted farmer opinion leaders. All opinion leaders mentioned in interviews have been added to our stakeholder list and will be invited into the stakeholder engagement work group process. Helping farmers understand why SGMA engagement matters to them is a key role all of these opinion leaders can play.

Section 2: Best Practices for Stakeholder Engagement

This kind of stakeholder engagement process is not easy, and there is no magic process that is guaranteed to be successful. Interviewees insisted that early, direct outreach will be essential to get agricultural and landowner stakeholders to participate in the GSA formation process. It is possible to leverage customer and member focused mailings sent by local agencies and organizations to get the message out about the SGMA. Advertisements in local newspapers ads might also be effective. This outreach can provide pertinent information about the law and local groundwater conditions, advertise informational workshops and online resources, and invite the public to provide input into the SGMA implementation process.

Interviewees offered a range of suggestions on what topics and tensions need to be addressed for effective SGMA stakeholder engagement. Many farmers and landowners don't even know that SGMA is happening or don't know anything about the law, so basic education and early engagement are greatly needed. Information needs to be disseminated through the internet and in-person workshops on the requirements and timelines of SGMA implementation, local groundwater conditions, and how public stakeholders can participate. Mistrust, fear, and blame are likely to arise concerning water rights, regulatory requirements, and a mismatch between personal experiences with well conditions and agency information about groundwater conditions. The facilitation team will want to both share the science of local hydrologic realities and groundwater recharge trends, and collect groundwater users' stories as a way to help inform our knowledge of groundwater conditions in the basin.

Interviewees offered suggestions on meeting locations. Rio Vista and Dixon were suggested as good locations to attract agricultural stakeholders. Vacaville or Fairfield were also suggested as good locations to attract stakeholders from the hill areas. Some thought that Rio Vista based stakeholders would be comfortable traveling to Fairfield for a meeting, but that the Rio Vista area would be accessible to stakeholders from the Sacramento and Yolo County parts of the subbasin.

Section 3: Perceived Challenges Relating to Governance and Water Management

Governance: Farmers and rural landowners have limited trust in government, particularly with those levels of government which are most distant from the rate-payer (e.g., the State). Trust in organizations such as SCWA, SID, and the County is moderate, while the smaller water and irrigation districts have a relatively good relationship with their rate-payers. To build widespread support or consensus on the GSA governance structure the local public agencies need to be inclusive and responsive

to farmer and landowner needs, and not come across as “government-centric” in the process. In order to improve the inclusiveness and transparency of the process, local agencies should hold meetings at times when farmers and landowners can participate, send meeting invitations and materials early, share meeting notes publicly, and be more transparent about critical behind-the-scenes conversations, such as the one concerning the possibility of modifying the existing subbasin boundaries. Many stakeholders find the basin boundary modification conversation a distraction from the larger goal of addressing the GSA formation requirement of the SGMA. We also heard that although trust between individual local agencies is relatively high, inter-agency coordination likely requires additional facilitation support for the GSA formation process to go smoothly and support clearer communication and ongoing good-will among agencies.

Water Management: *Some of the information acquired in this section will be more applicable for the Groundwater Sustainability Plan process after the GSA formation process is complete, but results are included here for reference.*

Groundwater conditions vary widely across the subbasin due to local geologic and hydrologic conditions and types of land management. For instance, the RD 2068 service area has a surplus of groundwater due to decades of irrigation with imported surface water coupled with its location in the Delta, while the Putah Creek area has observed reduced groundwater availability. While groundwater level information is relatively accurate for well-monitored areas of the subbasin (i.e., water and irrigation district service areas), current information is likely not indicative of conditions in some agricultural regions outside of these areas. Some wells have run short of water, and there has been some subsidence in the subbasin.

The recent, large-scale trend in converting farmland from annual crops to perennial crops (e.g., nut trees, wine-grapes) has begun to impact groundwater conditions. Some of these orchards and vineyards are being installed in areas that have never been irrigated before, many of them drill deep wells, and many of the owners are non-local investment groups. Because surface water deliveries in Solano County have remained consistent throughout the drought, it is the Yolo County side of the subbasin that likely has experienced the largest trend in ag well-drilling. Observations have been made that the precise irrigation regimes employed in these perennial farming systems may not be allowing for effective groundwater recharge. In general, groundwater quality is relatively high, although a few areas have had a challenge with salts or pesticide contaminants.

Interviewees suggested that groundwater recharge should be a part of sustainable groundwater management in the subbasin, but decisions to allow on-farm floodwater capture and groundwater recharge should be influenced by the winter pesticide regimes employed by individual farms. The Ag Commissioner’s office can be of help in this. While the Irrigated Lands Program is viewed quite favorably by the local agricultural community, there is some mistrust of SCWA stemming from a past lawsuit. A transparent and collaborative SGMA stakeholder engagement process offers an opportunity to build trust with the land-owner community in the county.