

Frequently Asked Questions

Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA)

What is SGMA?

SGMA is a California law passed in 2014 to ensure sustainable management of groundwater basins. It requires local agencies in high- and medium-priority groundwater basins to develop and implement groundwater sustainability plans (GSPs) to achieve sustainability by 2040. A GSP must consider all beneficial uses and users of groundwater, and SGMA emphasizes local control as one of the guiding principles of groundwater management. GSPs must be approved by the California Department of Water Resources (DWR). DWR requires annual reports be submitted by April 1st of each year documenting progress towards sustainability and GSP implementation and requires a more comprehensive evaluation of GSP implementation and SGMA compliance be submitted at least every five years.

What is a Groundwater Sustainability Agency (GSA) and how are GSAs formed?

A GSA is a local agency or combination of local agencies that elects to be or become a GSA pursuant to the process established in SGMA for purposes of developing and implementing a GSP to achieve sustainability by 2040 and otherwise comply with the mandates contained in SGMA.

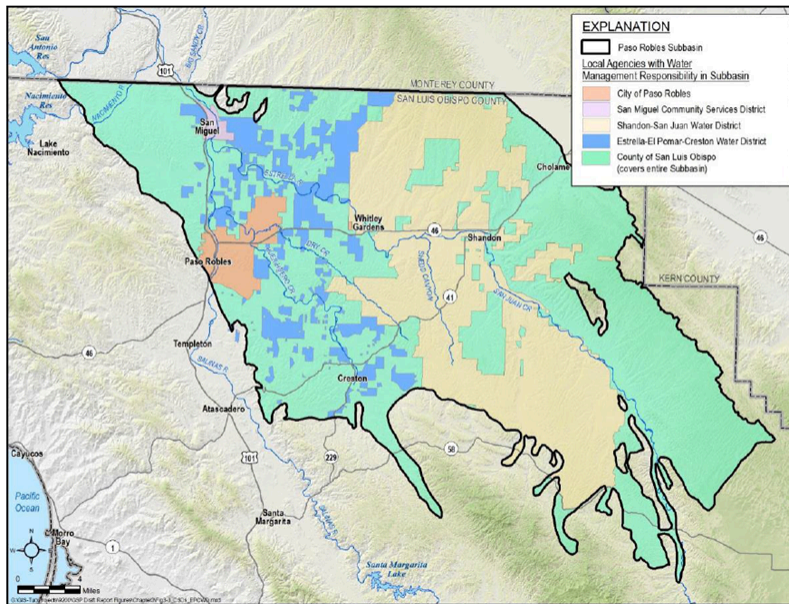
What is meant by basin sustainability by 2040? Why is this important / mandated?

Sustainability by 2040 means groundwater basins must avoid undesirable results, like overdraft or water quality impacts, by balancing groundwater extractions and recharge. The avoidance of undesirable results is required to protect water supplies, support agriculture, and ensure environmental and economic stability in California, where groundwater is a vital resource. In addition to annual reporting on GSP implementation, minimum thresholds (i.e. groundwater levels that GSAs have determined must be maintained to protect groundwater users) have been set at representative monitoring wells to further protect the basin from declining groundwater levels and undesirable results.

Governance & Representation

Who / which GSA represents me in the basin?

The GSA with jurisdiction over your property can be viewed on the map below, and a list of key contacts for each GSA is included below.



What is the Paso Robles Area Groundwater Authority (PRAGA)?

PRAGA is a joint powers authority comprised of the following GSAs:

- City of Paso Robles
- County of San Luis Obispo
- Estrella-El Pomar-Creston Water District
- Shandon San Juan Water District

Why was there a need to form PRAGA?

There are five GSAs in the basin: the City of Paso Robles, the County of San Luis Obispo, the Estrella-El Pomar-Creston Water District, the San Miguel Community Services District (San Miguel), and the Shandon San Juan Water District. While these GSAs coordinated in the development of a single GSP under a memorandum of agreement (MOA) and through the advisory Paso Basin Cooperative Committee (PBCC), it became clear that the MOA did not provide a workable long-term framework. For

example, if action was required, discussion would occur at the PBCC level and then each GSA would need to seek approval from their governing body, a cumbersome process. PRAGA was formed to coordinate implementation of SGMA.

What is the relationship between each GSA and PRAGA?

As indicated above, there are five local agencies in the basin that have become GSAs in accordance with the process outlined in SGMA. All five of these agencies were signatories to the MOA under which the GSP was prepared. Four of the GSAs (all but the San Miguel Community Services District) are members of PRAGA. The joint exercise of powers agreement states that each member retains its GSA status, and PRAGA is only authorized to exercise the powers specifically delegated to it by the members under said agreement.

Why is San Miguel not a part of PRAGA?

San Miguel covers a small portion of the basin and ultimately decided it did not need to be part of the major, basin-wide groundwater management activities at this time. However, San Miguel represents an important GSA in the basin, and PRAGA will continue to perform certain coordination activities with San Miguel (e.g. annual reports). In addition, the joint exercise of powers agreement sets forth a process by which San Miguel could become a member of PRAGA in the future should it change its mind.

How can I make my voice and concerns heard to the GSA/PRAGA/DWR?

Each GSA individually meets on specific dates, and all such meetings are public and allow for public comment as required by the Brown Act. PRAGA typically meets on the fourth Wednesday of every other month at 4 p.m. More information can be found at www.PasoRoblesAGA.org. PRAGA’s meetings are similarly conducted in accordance with the Brown Act. Thus, public comment can be made at its meetings. Alternatively, you can email PRAGA representatives or contact GSA representatives using the below information.

	Entity	Website	Phone	Email
1	Estrella-El Pomar-Creston Water District GSA	www.epcwd.org	(805) 354-5158	lg@epcwd.org
2	City of Paso Robles GSA	www.prcity.com	(805) 227-7276	water@prcity.com



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3	County of San Luis Obispo GSA	www.slocounty.ca.gov	(805) 781-4206	gw_groundwater@co.slo.ca.us
4	Shandon San Juan Water District GSA	www.ssjwd.org	(805) 451-0841	admin@ssjwd.org
5	Paso Robles Area Groundwater Authority	https://www.pasoroblesaga.org/	(805) 738-7242	info@PasoRoblesAGA.org
6	California Department of Water Resources	https://sgma.water.ca.gov		sgmps@water.ca.gov

Funding

Why does PRAGA need to collect charges? What is PRAGA going to achieve? What will the PRAGA charge be used for?

SGMA requires groundwater sustainability by 2040 and also specifically imposes certain regulatory requirements (e.g., the preparation of annual reports and periodic GSP evaluations), all of which in turn require significant expenditures for planning, monitoring, reporting, and projects. The groundwater charge proposed by PRAGA will fund the implementation of the GSP to achieve long-term basin sustainability and the necessary tasks to comply with SGMA.

Will the PRAGA adopt a charge?

If there is not a majority protest to the proposed charge, the PRAGA Board will vote on adopting and implementing a charge to fund the basin’s groundwater management program on August 1st.

Who will the PRAGA charge?

The proposed PRAGA charge applies to those who pump groundwater for agricultural (irrigated crops) and commercial purposes, and public water supply system groundwater pumpers. Rural/residential, de minimis extractors such as rural single-family households will ***not*** be charged directly.

Who gets to protest the groundwater charge?

The fee notices have been mailed to groundwater extractors that will be subject to the charge as identified in response to question number 3 above.

Who gave PRAGA the right/power to charge my groundwater use?



SGMA grants GSAs the authority to impose fees to fund the costs of SGMA compliance (Cal. Water Code §§ 10730–10730.6), and the joint exercise of powers agreement authorizes PRAGA to exercise this common power.

Basin Uses and Approach to the Groundwater Charge

If I am a grower/irrigator, how is PRAGA going to calculate my charge?

The proposed groundwater charge is based on the amount of groundwater pumped *that is consumptively used*. Consumed groundwater is always less than the total pumped because some of the groundwater pumped stays in the root zone or percolates back into the aquifer. PRAGA measures consumptive groundwater use differently depending on the type of groundwater use in question.

For agricultural irrigation, PRAGA uses evapotranspiration (ET) measurements to calculate consumptive groundwater use. ET refers to the process by which water is both transferred from land to the atmosphere by evaporation and from plants to the atmosphere by transpiration. This process uses a combination of satellite data, precipitation data, and meteorological stations deployed in agricultural fields to determine parcel- and field-specific consumptive groundwater use measurements for all agricultural operations. By calculating total ET and subtracting precipitation, PRAGA can identify the consumptive groundwater use for agricultural pumpers.

For water systems that pump groundwater, the amount of total pumping consumptively used is determined based on considerations of the type of properties within a system's service area.

For commercial groundwater use, water use considerations specific to the property in question are used to calculate consumptive use. Many small commercial operations that use groundwater (such as restaurants and retail) are assumed to have no consumptive use, as they are on septic systems and their water returns to the aquifer. Consumptive use for wineries, which make up the vast majority of commercial groundwater use, is calculated using data from the California Regional Water Quality Control Board and wine industry expertise.

I am a rancher and only use groundwater to water my livestock—will PRAGA charge me?

No, ranchers will not be charged for watering their livestock under the proposed groundwater charge program. Based on findings detailed in the Cost-of-Service Study, groundwater use for watering cattle was determined to be negligible in that it is such a small amount that it does not necessitate a service provided by PRAGA.

If I fallow or stop irrigating my land, will PRAGA still charge me?



No, the intent of the proposed groundwater charge is to account for consumptive groundwater use. If no groundwater use occurs, then no charge will be imposed.

Will rural domestic residential groundwater users be charged in the future by PRAGA?

As described in the Cost-of-Service Study, PRAGA accounted for rural domestic groundwater users but made a decision to exempt these users from the proposed charge. PRAGA plans to fund the cost allocated to them through in-kind services or contributions by PRAGA's members. Because the Cost-of-Service Study states that rural domestic users will not be charged directly, PRAGA *cannot* legally charge these users under the proposed charge program.

How long will the groundwater charge be in effect? Will it ever go away?

The proposed groundwater charge is based on a five-year estimated budget spanning from fiscal years 2025-26 through 2029-30. While this planning period is the basis for the budget and rate, the PRAGA Board of Directors may elect to continue the groundwater charge beyond this timeframe. However, the maximum rate cannot be exceeded without implementing a new charge process. It may be necessary to reevaluate the charge in 2029-30, which could lead to a revised or modified charge program.

Other Examples of Funding Mechanisms

How are other groundwater basins in the State funding their sustainability initiatives?

GSA's across the State use various methods to fund their sustainability initiatives. Similar to PRAGA, many GSA's initially funded their efforts through a combination of grants and general fund support / member agency contributions. In recent years, many GSA's have also shifted toward a fee- or charge-based approach. Charges based on groundwater extraction are common.

Pumping & Pumping Rights

Will my right to pump groundwater be affected, restricted, or taken away?

SGMA leaves unchanged the common law system of water rights, stating "nothing in [SGMA], or in any groundwater management plan adopted pursuant to [SGMA], determines or alters . . . groundwater rights under common law." (Cal. Water Code § 10720.5) However, SGMA also authorizes GSA's to, among other things, regulate groundwater extractions, permit transfers of groundwater extraction allocations, and assess fees on pumping, while noting that a GSA-implemented limitations on pumping "shall not be construed to be a final determination of rights to extract groundwater." (Cal. Water Code §§ 10726.4 and 10730 et seq.) At this time, there are no plans to regulate extractions in the foreseeable future, and the joint exercise of powers agreement specifically authorizes a *voluntary* groundwater demand reduction program.

Is PRAGA going to require meters to be installed on all wells?

There is no plan to impose a metering requirement on any pumpers at this time for purposes of SGMA implementation. The GSA's collectively agreed to use an ET methodology as described above for measuring agricultural groundwater use in the basin. The ET methodology relies on satellite imagery and ground-truthing weather stations to determine how much water evaporates and transpires from vegetation in the basin. PRAGA currently owns five of these in-field weather stations that are strategically placed in the basin to calibrate ET estimates. In addition, SGMA specifically excludes de minimis extractors from the authority granted to GSA's to require metering. (Cal. Water Code § 10725.8)

Why doesn't PRAGA just require the irrigators to stop pumping or pump less groundwater?

SGMA allows basins to reduce their overdraft over the 20-year implementation period (ending in 2040) and provides for local control on how that groundwater pumping reduction target is met. The GSA's/PRAGA are working to incentivize pumpers to voluntarily reduce their pumping through a voluntary demand reduction program (e.g. by making sure they are not adversely impacted under the

County's agricultural offset regulation). However, if pumping reduction targets are not achieved through voluntary measures, PRAGA is authorized to implement mandatory pumping reductions (i.e. groundwater allocations).

If I stop irrigating my land, will I lose my water rights or my future right to pump groundwater?

As indicated above in response to question 1, SGMA does not grant GSAs the authority to determine water rights. Programs are currently being developed to ensure that the amount you may pump is not hindered by any regulation(s) PRAGA / the GSAs may adopt under SGMA in the future as a result of any such cessation.

What happens if we just keep pumping as much as we are pumping?

Absent significant new water supply projects, if no pumping reductions occur, the basin will continue to be overdrafted by approximately 13,700 acre-feet (AF) each year (1 AF is roughly a football field covered by one foot of water). This will result in a loss of groundwater storage and declining groundwater levels in the basin. If groundwater sustainability is not achieved by following the management actions outlined in the GSP, DWR will likely refer the basin to the State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB), and after a public hearing, the SWRCB will likely put the basin in probation. The probable further result is as follows: most if not all pumpers will have to report monthly groundwater use directly to the SWRCB, pumpers extracting more than 500 AF each year will be required to install a meter, and pumpers will be required to pay groundwater extraction fees currently ranging from \$20-\$55 per AF.

Projects & Alternative Water Supplies

Why doesn't PRAGA bring in other water supplies into the basin? Like Nacimiento, State Water, and/or recycled water supplies? What about desalination?

The GSAs have considered the development of water supply projects and recently completed two preliminary engineering studies/reports to consider (1) a blended irrigation water supply project (consisting of Nacimiento and City of Paso Robles recycled water), and (2) a State Water Project delivery/recharge project. These studies/reports were completed in 2024 and 2025 using grant funding. A recycled water project was also considered in the San Miguel Community Services District area. However, all water supply augmentation projects were considered to be too expensive for agricultural users at this time. These options may be reevaluated at a future date, or a hybrid of the projects may be considered.



The studies/reports are linked below:

- **Blended** | [Paso Basin Blended Water Supply Preliminary Engineering Report \(March 2025\)](#)
- **SWP** | [Paso Robles Subbasin State Water Project Supplemental Supply Study Preliminary Engineering Report \(June 2025\)](#)
- **SWP** | [Paso Robles Groundwater Subbasin State Water Project Supplemental Water Supply Project State Water Project Supply Options and Costs \(June 2025\)](#)

Why doesn't PRAGA capture and recharge stream/river flows when they occur. Like in the winter of 2022?

The GSAs recognize that there can be significant benefits to the basin and groundwater users if excess stream/river flows can be captured and used for groundwater basin recharge and replenishment. Capture is an important component of our future plans to bring the basin into a sustainable condition.

Why doesn't PRAGA use flows in the Salinas River and streams like Huer Huero, Estrella, and San Juan Creek instead of letting all that free water go to the ocean?

As previously described, PRAGA plans to assess the feasibility of capturing water from local surface water sources. Where conditions are suitable and the necessary surface water rights exist or can be obtained, the GSAs/PRAGA will have the opportunity to construct managed aquifer recharge features and facilities to beneficially divert, capture, and recharge flows in the Salinas River and streams like Huer Huero, Estrella, and San Juan Creek to replenish the basin.

If certain agricultural and/or industry sectors caused the problem, why don't they fix the problem?

GSA agricultural representatives understand agriculture is the largest user of groundwater and are committed to implementing the GSP to achieve sustainability by 2040. A specific project currently being developed is a voluntary demand reduction program to assist landowners to repurpose (e.g. fallow) irrigated land thus reducing demand on groundwater in the basin.

