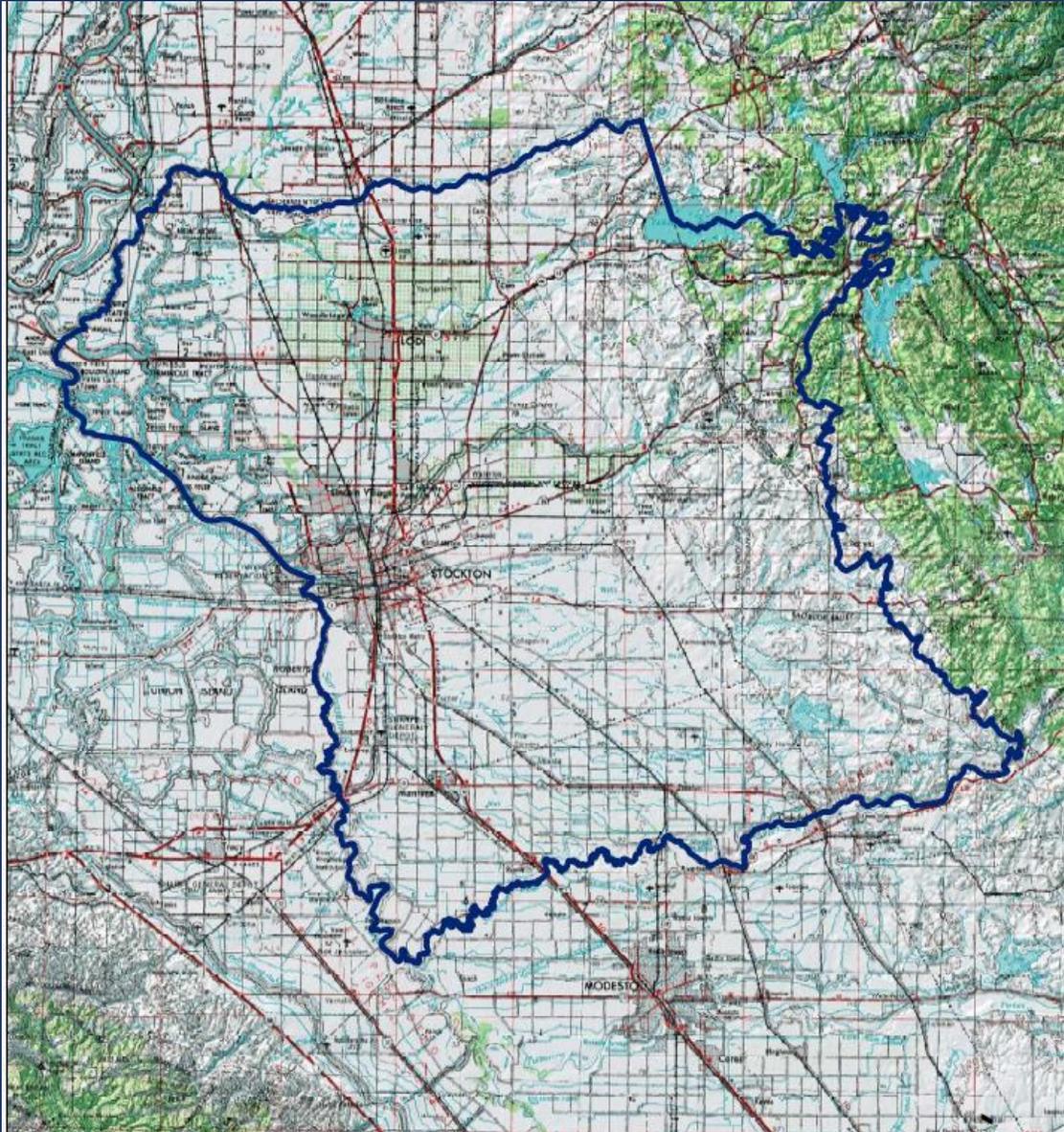


Eastern San Joaquin Groundwater Sustainability Work Group Stakeholder Assessment Highlights Report



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Acronyms and Abbreviations

GSWG	Groundwater Sustainability Work Group
GWA	Groundwater Authority
EJ	Environmental Justice
SGMA	Sustainable Groundwater Management Act
GSP	Groundwater Sustainability Plan
GSA	Groundwater Sustainability Agency
SA	Situation Assessment
ESJ	Eastern San Joaquin
GAC	Groundwater Advisory Committee
CEC	Contaminants of Emerging Concern
GIS	Geographic Information System

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The Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) requires that:

- Groundwater users help to plan for and preserve their shared natural resources
- Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSAs) prepare a list of interested parties and consider their interests in the agency's Groundwater Sustainability Plan (GSP)
- GSAs obtain and consider groundwater user ideas before the development of their GSA and GSP

The Eastern San Joaquin (ESJ) Groundwater Authority (GWA) and all of its sister GSAs are pioneering the development of GSPs. At this point in time, there is no proven path to success or simple recipe for engaging stakeholders. Instead, while the planning process can be informed by other planning efforts, it ultimately will involve experimentation and adaptive management as new data and ideas emerge and new approaches are tested.

This Highlights report considers one aspect of stakeholder engagement in the ESJ GWA's groundwater planning process and offers insights and suggestions on ways to enrich existing approaches. Constructive remarks from stakeholders provide a feedback loop that can be utilized for continuous improvement and identifying the future best use of resources.

Background

In partial fulfillment of SGMA stakeholder requirements, the Eastern San Joaquin (ESJ) Groundwater Sustainability Work Group (GSWG) was convened to inform the development of the Eastern San Joaquin Groundwater Sustainability Plan (GSP). After a few meetings of the GSWG, some group members expressed frustration with the effort. They also shared they would like an opportunity to provide more direct input into the GSP deliberation process.

Based on this input the ESJ Groundwater Authority (GWA) staff requested support from the CA Department of Water Resources (DWR) Facilitation Support Services Program for the services of a 3rd party facilitator to work with the group. and noted it might be a good time for a "reset" in the engagement process. After an initial consultation, the facilitator recommended use of a Situation Assessment (SA or assessment). The assessment is considered a best, first step for developing stakeholder engagement recommendations.

Situation Assessments

As illustrated in Figure 1. Stakeholder Engagement Specifics (next page), assessments identify the stakeholder engagement specifics of who, what, when, where, why and how. An assessment also helps to clarify:

- Problems and opportunities
- Decisions to be made
- Key issues requiring stakeholder concurrence
- Preferred communication approaches
- Preferred planning approaches and solutions

The overall goal of the SA was to inform the Eastern San Joaquin GSP development and broader SGMA activities about stakeholder concerns.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT – Who, What, Where, When, Why & How

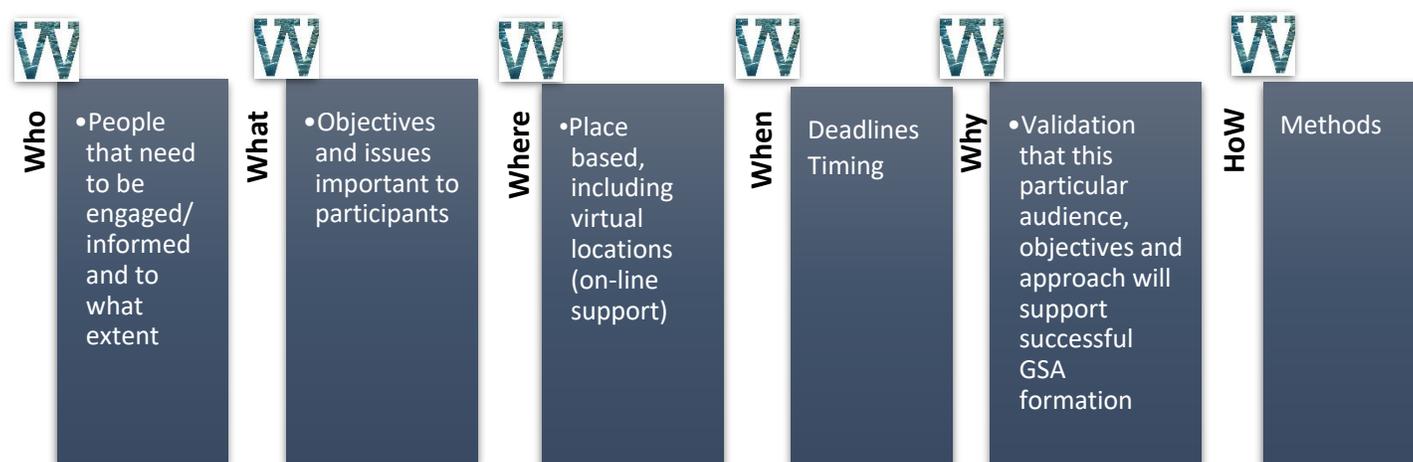


Figure 1. Stakeholder Engagement Specifics

Interview Process

Work Group members received a briefing about the Situation Assessment process at their July 2018 meeting and were asked if they would like to participate. Upon indicating interest, the 23 active GSWG members were invited to schedule an interview. Of that group 16¹ completed interviews between August 23 and November 3, 2018. An additional interview was conducted December 8, 2018 to accommodate a member that had been traveling. Interviews ran 45 – 90 minutes each and included both in-person and phone interviews. Participants were advised their responses would be bundled and reported in the aggregate to protect anonymity. They were also informed that, in the event knowing the source of the comment was critical to understanding the comment, they would be asked to provide permission for any direct quotes. Most respondents commented they were not particularly concerned with maintaining anonymity.

Questions

Seventeen questions covered a range of topics on the planning process and GSP contents including the following:

- Roles of Group Members
- Groundwater Authority (GWA) Governance
- Decision-making
- Work Group Outreach and Meetings
- Public Involvement
- Knowledge of SGMA
- GSP Content
- GSP Implementation
- Next Steps

¹ Colin Bailey & Espe Velma, The Environmental Justice Coalition for Water, Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla, Restore the Delta, Robert Dean, Calaveras County Resource Conservation District, Mary Elizabeth, Sierra Club, Joey Giordano, The Wine Group, Jack Hamm, Lima Ranch, Mary Hildebrand, South Delta Water Agency, George V. Hartmann, The Hartmann Law Firm, Michael Machado, Farmer, Ara Marderosian, Sequoia Forest Keeper, Will Price, University of the Pacific & Vice Chair, SJ County Advisory Water Commission, Daryll Quaresma, 2Q Farming, Inc., Chris Shutes, California Sportfishing Protection Alliance, Linda Turkatte, San Joaquin County Environmental Health Department, Ken Vogel, San Joaquin Farm Bureau Federation, Gene E. Bigler, Puentes

RESULTS

Following is a summary of interview responses presented in two parts: Part I. Process and Part 2. Content. It should be noted that responses reflect perspectives of the interviewees at a point in time. Group members had several opportunities to review the information contained in the summary, including at a full group meeting on December 12, 2018. These reviews affirmed the summary's accuracy and continued relevance.

In discussing results with the technical consultants and staff, as well as in a review of publicly available materials, it was determined that some group suggestions may already be implemented or that some perceived inadequacies may be the result of not having current information. In these cases, the corrective action would be increased communication to address misconceptions.

Part I. Process

Following is a summary of interview results related to the group process, outreach and stakeholder involvement.

Outreach and Engagement

For the first part of the interview, participants were asked about aspects of process – or the “how” behind different activities such as:

- Work Group formation
- Overall planning to date
- GWA governance
- Decision making
- Work Group meetings and materials
- Opportunities for input
- Outreach and communication

Work Group Formation

Participants learned about Work Group formation by hearing about it from someone else, receiving an invitation email or Involvement with related activities. Six participants expressed an opinion that the initial outreach did not seem well-planned. For example, many organizations were not initially contacted about formation of the Work Group and that the application date had to be extended. Several members felt that the process would have benefitted from having stakeholders involved early on, particularly to inform the Stakeholder Engagement and Public Outreach Plan.

Work Group Perspectives

Participants became involved with the Work Group to represent a particular perspective, contribute to a deliberative, equitable process, and/or due to being “volun-told” to participate. Overall members reported feeling most knowledgeable about SGMA generally, with an average or more basic understanding of GSA and GSP requirements. Half of the respondents expressed concerns that the Work Group effort was about “checking boxes” and would not involve meaningful contributions to the GSP.

Meeting Presentations

Meeting presentations were largely characterized as thorough and well prepared, providing the right level of detail for technical content. That said some members sought more information about the deliverables to be developed, and the timeline for those work products, as well as more detail on water use and local conditions.

Several offered that presentations should provide the basis for discussion, beyond providing information. They felt discussion should focus on those topics where the GWA is seeking input. Over a third remarked that technical materials, studies and referenced reports need to be posted and made available to help process and respond to technical information.

Meeting Discussions

Members value Work Group meeting discussions as an opportunity to share and hear perspectives. About two-thirds of the respondents felt that more time was needed for discussion and reflection, although not necessarily by lengthening meeting time.

Challenging meeting dynamics were discussed by almost half of the participants. They provided examples of finger-pointing or louder voices sometimes controlling conversation. Some members indicated that the facilitators step in when the dialog digresses, while others saw the facilitators as steering away from difficult questions or conversations. Several suggested that the flow of the meetings could be improved. One suggestion was to provide responses to comments and questions raised at the previous meeting.

Suggestions for Strengthening the Work Group Process

The GSWG members offered a variety of suggestions ways to strengthen their group process including the following:

- Increase discussion time, by providing shorter recaps and by highlighting the content of presentation slides.
- Ensure that everyone gets to speak
- Provide some flexibility in meetings to follow group discussions
- Involve decision-makers in Work Group meetings
- Post related technical materials, studies and reports
- Send meeting materials as attachments, with user-friendly software (e.g. Word)
- Improve the quality of handouts, especially maps

Decision Making & Input Process

The ESJ GWA provides a forum for the 17 GSAs of the eastern San Joaquin Subbasin to work together to develop and implement a single GSP. Figure 2. Levels of Decision Making, illustrates the general roles of the entities engaged in preparing a GSP as defined by the GWA and presented to the GSWG. While Figure 2 provides an explanation of relationships, GSWG members still have varying understandings about the decision-making roles and processes. Most report they understand that the GWA will make the final decisions; however, it's not clear to them how the exchange of ideas occurs between the GWA, Groundwater Advisory Committee (GAC), consultants and GSWG.



Figure 2. Levels of Decision Making

Most expressed that GSWG responsibilities are not well defined, and that it's not clear how input from the Work Group will be responded to or used. There are also questions as to whether input from different sources (e.g. Advisory Committee, Work Group members, Agricultural interests) is weighted differently.

Suggestions for Improving GSWG Relevance to GWA

Most members want clarification on how GSWG comments will be incorporated into GSP development. Several suggested the GWA should identify the topics they would like the Work Group to focus on. Members are interested in what the GWA like to know. They also felt there was a need to define the mission, deliverables and timeline for the GSWG and clarify what outside input is being sought.

Representation

Several members identified a need to increase the diversity of representation within the overall decision-making process. Five respondents specifically suggested there is a need to expand the existing GWA composition beyond water delivery interests, to include environmental and environmental justice (EJ) interests – and more diverse representation in the decision-making process.

Public Outreach & Suggestions for Enhancing Public Outreach

Members believe that many water users, who could be impacted by the GSP, are not aware of this process. Their sense is that outreach to the broader public is lacking. As with other topics the group offered suggestions for improvement including the following.

- Make it easy for people to follow this effort. Information should be understandable – explain the legislation, what it looks at, and the timeline.
- Use a variety of approaches to share information and distribute the draft GSP.
- Record and post meetings of the GWA and technical Advisory Committee.
- Build capacity for outreach by the respective GSAs.

Interestingly the suggestions generally track what would be considered general outreach best practices.

Part II. GSP Development and Implementation

For the second segment of the interview, GSWG members were asked about expectations and any specific issues or interests related to GSP development, priorities for GSP content, and thoughts on GSP implementation.

Expectations for GSP Development

All members spoke about the need for verifiable data. For example, having measurements for water use and water extraction across all sectors. One person advocated for a conceptual model and water budget at the boundary level for each GSA; another sought acreage numbers for individual crops.

One respondent specified three main issues that set the context for water management in the ESJ basin: unimpaired flows, SGMA and the Delta proposals. Several others mentioned that if current impairments can be offset, the GSP should discuss how to sustain groundwater resources into the future. The plan could be used to get ahead of the curve, while conditions aren't that bad.

A number of members also emphasized the need for the GSP to be coordinated with existing jurisdictional plans and requirements.

Data on Resource and Management Conditions

Related to the emphasis on verifiable data, the GSWG has a number of specific information requests including the following:

- Actual occurrence of subsidence and associated geology
- Pumping depths, costs, rates and cones of depression
- Pumping practices and consequences (e.g. more pumping on weekends, when electric rates are lower can drop water levels up to 25')
- Access to potable water
- Groundwater quality (salinity, other contaminants)
- Groundwater recharge and substitution
- System dynamics in the basin: age of water at depth, tertiary flows, conditions at basin margin
- Influence from factors outside basin boundaries
- Recharge patterns

Priorities for GSP Content

Member suggestions for priority GSP content focused on several themes:

1. Management actions need to address the resource conditions in each sub-basin and management area – the same approaches won't work in all areas.
2. Smarter, more creative solutions are needed to avoid redirected impacts and unintended consequences. The GWA should look at strategies being used elsewhere.
3. Groundwater quality must be considered, including saltwater intrusion, salinity and other contaminants. Contaminants of Emerging Concern (CEC) could affect use of treated wastewater for recharge.
4. Use Geographic Information System (GIS) layers to make information user-friendly for decision-makers. Provide a map of recharge areas, including green infrastructure options.

Considerations for Implementation

The stakeholders emphasized that a comprehensive implementation approach needs to address all issues, with enough flexibility to adapt to unforeseen circumstances. They also affirmed that buy-in and support will be needed. Some suggested a stakeholder or advisory board should be convened when the GSP is submitted and adopted, to review and inform implementation.

The group also highlighted the need to consider land use impacts. Land use is a local issue and a big item for most stakeholders. Changes in net water demand will have real impacts downstream. This means that approvals for well permits should be evaluated in terms of the water budget. Groundwater recharge will also need to be an element of any implementation efforts.

As emphasized in earlier sections, the GSWG members also discussed the need for coordination agreements, data management and sharing protocols, and monitoring requirements.

Next Steps

Based on the Stakeholder recommendations the third party facilitators are making recommendations for adjustments to the stakeholder process. These are provided as a separate document.