

Group says state regulations needed to preserve Valley groundwater

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By Mark Grossi



Michelle Sneed, USGS hydrologist, stands near a buckled section of the Delta-Mendota Canal that she says is caused by over pumping of groundwater water south of Los Banos on Tues., Jan. 28, 2014 HECTOR AMEZCUA — hamezcua@sacbee.com

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A key advisory group told Gov. Jerry Brown's administration Monday that regulation must be part of the fight against overdrafting precious groundwater -- the state's declining safety net in drought crisis.

The nonprofit, independent California Water Foundation recommends control of underground water by local groups under the authority of state regulations. But if the local groups failed, state authorities should enforce the rules, the foundation recommended.

The Water Foundation spoke to groups and individuals all over California before making the recommendations.



"There was a high level of agreement among the interest groups, businesses, growers, communities, advocates and conservationists we spoke to," said Lester Snow, foundation executive director. "People, farms and the environment all need a more sustainable groundwater supply. We need to bring an end to the overdraft."

The recommendations, [contained a report released Monday](#), add momentum to a drought-inspired movement for groundwater regulation in California, which does not have such rules.

Last week, the state Department of Water Resources released a report saying groundwater levels have decreased in nearly all areas of the state since spring 2013. Since 2008, many areas reached their lowest levels ever recorded, including the southern San Joaquin Valley.

After one of the driest winters in decades and water cutbacks to farming, groundwater levels are expected to drop even more by the end of summer.

The Legislature has a groundwater bill in each house. Both are winding their way through committees.

Sen. Fran Pavley, D-Agoura Hills, wrote SB 1168, focused on sustainable groundwater management. Assembly Member Roger Dickinson, D-Sacramento, wrote AB 1739, which would define groundwater management and provide enhanced minimum requirements for local groundwater management plans.

Growers polled in the new Water Foundation report may have agreed with sustainable management of underground water, but any proposed groundwater law is viewed with suspicion in Valley agriculture, say farm leaders.

Many growers are worried about how regulation would be enforced, said Dave Orth, general manager of the Kings River Conservation District, who has been involved with the Water Foundation's report.

"There is a great fear of the unknown," he said. "But we need to start forward with a very careful process to reverse the downward trend with groundwater. It's going to take 20 to 25 years."

Fixing the state's overdraft problem is one of the main missions of the Sacramento-based Water Foundation, which formed three years ago. The group is part of the Resources Legacy Fund, an innovative nonprofit organization with the mission of maintaining natural resources.

Snow said groundwater is an essential part of California's future, adding that he hoped people would remain involved in the discussion and resist the urge to oppose regulation without hearing all of the debate.

"We need people to stay at the table with this issue," he said. "We need to get something done to protect an important resource."

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