

Roger Dickinson: Historic groundwater law will secure California's water future

By Roger Dickinson

Roger Dickinson THE SACRAMENTO BEE

With the stroke of his pen, Gov. Jerry Brown has placed California on par with all other Western states, ensuring a long-term, stable and reliable supply of groundwater for our homes, farms and factories.

By approving my Assembly Bill 1739 and Sen. Fran Pavley's Senate Bill 1168 and SB 1319, which make up the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, local communities now have the tools and the mandate to restore a resource that has often been mismanaged and, consequently, vastly depleted.

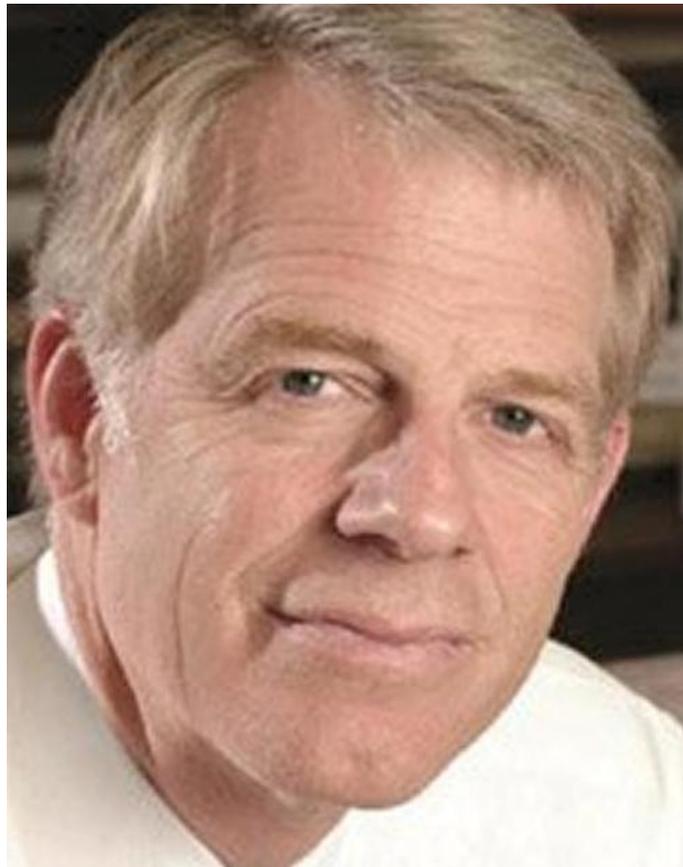
Our statewide drought has shone a bright light on the contribution groundwater makes to the state's water supply. In an average year, groundwater provides about 40 percent of the water used in homes and for irrigation. However, in dry periods, our reliance on groundwater jumps to as much as 60 percent of overall supply.

Studies reveal that our failure to manage groundwater extraction has resulted in an overdraft of more than 4 million acre-feet in the Central Valley alone. As groundwater levels precipitously dropped, overlying land mass subsided. Subsidence leads to crumbling roads, pipelines and irrigation canals, and the loss of tens of millions of dollars in public and private infrastructure. As groundwater levels fall, so too does its quality as concentrations of surface contaminants go undiluted, leaving the remaining supply unfit for human consumption and irrigation.

If the governor had not signed these bills, the problems of groundwater overdraft would be compounded with serious economic, environmental and social consequences. Critics have not questioned the existence of problems resulting from overdraft because they are established fact. However, critics, such as the 13 legislators who wrote the recent Op-Ed, "[Rushed groundwater bill hurts Valley economy](#)," do make assertions ancillary to the primary issue – claiming the bills are overreaching, undermine local control, were drafted in secret and will hurt our agricultural economy.

The availability of groundwater and the economic value of a farm or ranch are intertwined. Having groundwater to irrigate crops makes a farming operation viable and valuable, which is exactly why groundwater management is so necessary. I shudder to think of the loss in property value and the inability of a farmer or rancher to get financing if their wells runs dry. Additionally, unmanaged groundwater basins lead to inequities among different property owners overlying the same basin.

As groundwater levels drop, property owners are drilling deeper wells at ever-increasing cost. Some owners can afford to drill deeper wells, others cannot.



The legislation clearly delineates state policy that groundwater is best managed at the local level. Beyond identifying where sustainable groundwater plans are required, the law allows local entities to determine the type of groundwater governance that is most appropriate and allows those entities to choose the management tools that work best for the local conditions.

The act was deliberately written to be transparent. Pavley and I crafted the bills through a painstaking process of stakeholder review and input. There were numerous public meetings to discuss every issue incorporated in the legislation with participation from local government, water agencies, business, agriculture and environmental organizations.

The Sustainable Groundwater Management Act explicitly states that it shall not affect any existing surface or groundwater rights already established by law. Finally, the law allows maximum flexibility for groundwater management plans to achieve the statute's objective.

Brown's action in signing the act is a stellar example of collaboration among many concerned voices. Support from more than 100 organizations from every sector is a testament to the careful balance of interests built into the act which will help make achieving sustainable and reliable groundwater a reality.

Dickinson represents Assembly District 7, which includes Sacramento and West Sacramento.

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