



Summary of Merced Subbasin Groundwater Sustainability Plan Community Workshop in Livingston, CA

February 25, 2019

Overview

The fourth Merced Subbasin Groundwater Sustainability Plan community workshop was held in Livingston, CA on Monday, February 25, 2019 in the City Hall Conference Room from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. The workshop was attended by approximately 25 community members.

The goals for the workshop included the following:

1. Provide information about options for sustainable groundwater management for the Merced Subbasin
2. Obtain participant feedback, including input on the various projects and management actions under consideration.
3. Encourage attendees to share their knowledge and experiences with groundwater in the Merced Subbasin.

The workshop was publicized using the following methods:

1. Press Release was issued to the Merced Sun-Star, Merced County Times, and posted on www.mercedsgma.org.
2. Display Ad was published in the main news section of the Merced Sun-Star on February 22 and February 23.
3. Workshop Notices (English and Spanish) were widely distributed by partner organizations to their email distribution lists and were posted on the three GSA websites as well as several partner websites.
4. Self-Help Enterprises (SHE) and The Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability assisted with outreach by distributing workshop notices.

SHE provided a Spanish translator and communications system that supports simultaneous translation. No one utilized the translation option at this workshop.

Summary of Presentations and Discussions

Presentation 1 - Groundwater in the Livingston Area

Jose Ramirez, City Manager, Livingston, CA provided an overview of some of the challenges faced relative to water supply and water quality. He noted that there had been contaminants in Livingston wells causing them to be shut down. To meet the demand, the City was able to connect several wells and establish centralized treatment. He noted that Livingston is 100% metered and that the City is planning to diversify its water supply portfolio to include surface water from the Merced River. Questions included the following:

1. Question: The Merced River was noted as a source, are you talking about taking water from Merced River?

Answer: Yes, but the permit process is very long. The plan includes installing horizontal wells below the river to access Merced River water.

2. Question: What is the per person water consumption in Livingston?

Answer: An estimate is about half acre foot (AF) per household.

3. Question: Is Gallo on the Livingston water system?

Answer: No, Gallo has asked to be connected to the water system, but it would require a large capital investment.

Presentation 2 – SGMA Overview and Current and Projected Groundwater Conditions

Alyson Watson, Woodward & Curran, provided a review of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA and the three Groundwater Management Agencies involved in the development of the Merced Subbasin Groundwater Sustainability Plan (GSP)). She also explained what a GSP is and what it includes. This presentation concluded with an overview of the current and projected groundwater conditions for the Merced Subbasin.

The following questions were asked by participants:

1. Question: Is the “critical overdraft” designation applied to entire Merced Subbasin; is any area excepted from this?

Answer: This designation applies to entire basin, but there can be areas within the basin where recharge is occurring.

2. Question: Does the Merced Subbasin boundary complement or follow the groundwater aquifer boundaries?

Answer: Loosely. Three of the four boundaries are generally located along rivers with one generally following the county boundary.

3. Question: Do minimum thresholds apply to private wells?

Answer: Private wells will not have minimum thresholds. This also includes private businesses that have wells. There are specific criteria for establishing groundwater monitoring wells. Private wells often do not meet these criteria to capture what is needed for reporting.

4. Question: What is CASGEM?

Answer: It is the California Statewide Groundwater Elevation Monitoring Program. It was established before SGMA to monitor groundwater levels across the state. For the GSP, we will use existing wells from the CASGEM network and add monitoring wells where needed.

5. Question: What is the status of the technical work? Where can we see the technical work?

Answer: As draft GSP sections are prepared, they will be posted to the website for review in the Resources section. Currently, one chapter is available, Basin Settings - Hydrogeologic Conceptual Model (HCM).

6. Question: How do the new statewide domestic use goals (50 gallons per person per day by 2030) relate to SGMA?

Answer: The urban water agencies will be working to achieve those goals for their service areas, which will help cities reduce their groundwater pumping. The goals do not apply to private domestic groundwater wells. These users are called de minimus users when they extract more than two acre feet per year. They are subject to SGMA, but the GSAs cannot require them to be metered.

7. Question: How does the GSP account for the SED (Substitute Environmental Document) for the Water Quality Control Plan for the San Francisco Bay/Sacramento–San Joaquin Delta Estuary? Would the state be charged for taking water from the Merced River?

Answer: The groundwater modeling for the Merced Subbasin does not assume approval of the SED. If it is approved it would change surface water availability. It is not likely that the region could charge the state for water dedicated to instream flows.

8. Question/Comment: Referring to presentation slide titled “The Groundwater Model Estimates Flows Into and Out of the Groundwater Basin,” this is all theory, right?

Answer: The technical team is using the model to develop a projection for future groundwater use for the three GSAs.

9. Question: Who has to approve the GSP?

Answer: The three GSAs have to approve the GSP. By January 31, 2020 the GSAs will submit the approved GSP to the Department of Water Resources (DWR). The DWR will then have to approve the GSP. If the DWR does not approve the GSP, the Merced Subbasin GSAs would be forwarded to the State Water Resources Control Board for enforcement or intervention.

10. Question: Is there no discussion with DWR after the GSP is submitted to them?

Answer: DWR and the State Water Board have not fully described the process after submittal. However, we anticipate that there will be some back and forth if DWR identifies deficiencies in the GSP.

11. Question: When looking at the 50-year forecast, how would it change if there were more dams for water storage?

Answer: A dam might not change the water budget (referring to the water projection graph presented) but it could increase seepage or change pumping depending on how it is used – for example, if more surface water were used instead of groundwater.

12. Question: What is the baseline for the model?

Answer: The model uses a 50-year hydrology (rainfall and runoff from the last 50 years) and estimates of future population and land use in 2040.

13. Question/Comment: So the graph (referring to the graph of groundwater model estimates) is saying we need projects?

Answer: Yes, projects to increase groundwater recharge and surface water supplies.

14. Clarification requested: Snowpack affects our groundwater. What is the impact to our groundwater from the snowpack in the Sierras?

Answer: Snowpack does affect the Merced Subbasin groundwater, but it is not more significant than the local pumping/use. We are using state estimates of future changes in snowpack.

15. Question: Are you doing isotope dating of the groundwater?

Answer: UC Merced did some isotope dating. Previous pumping was estimated to be 1000-year water, and now it's 50- to 100-year water.

Presentation 3 – Sustainable Management for Merced Subbasin Groundwater

Alyson Watson, Woodward & Curran, explained that the goal of the GSP is to try to balance groundwater over the long term. The term “Sustainable Yield” was explained generally as how much groundwater can be pumped without causing undesirable results. The Sustainable Yield can be estimated using the model and then conditions can be modified to balance stored groundwater over time. Once the sustainable yield is developed, then the “Groundwater Allocation Framework” describes an approach for allocating the sustainable yield among the three GSAs within the Merced Subbasin. The Allocation Framework includes three “buckets” of water that are accounted for in the allocation: 1) overlying use, 2) appropriative use and 3) recovery of seepage of developed water. Alyson also discussed how to address unirrigated lands that may never have been pumped – should the allocation be the same? She explained the possibility of partial allocations and how that might relate to a water market.

1. Question: I'm an agricultural water user. I buy water from MID and then it seeps in on my land. Whose water is that?

Answer: We are looking at an allocation of 400,000 AF and working now to sort out seepage considerations. Currently, this would not be considered seepage of a developed water supply.

2. Question: What about water banking?

Answer: When we get to the discussion about projects and management actions, recharge projects (to bank water in the ground) are a type of project being considered.

3. Question: Shouldn't there be a credit for this (water recharge)?

Answer: Yes, the owner of a recharge project would receive credit for developing the water supply.

4. Question: Say someone has a piece of land and they don't use it. If we have wet year, would they get credit for recharge on these lands?

Answer: This gets to the practical implementation – you don't get credit for the water that falls on your land; the allocation is for the entire Merced Subbasin.

5. Question: Are there farmers in these groups (referring to the Coordinating Committee and Stakeholder Committee)?

Answer: Yes.

6. Question: If you are only using part of your land, can you apply your full allocation to part of your land? You should also be able to carry over some part of what you have not used into the previous year.

Answer: The GSAs have to determine how these types of situations will be handled.

7. Question: If a person hasn't used irrigation, they are paying the standby fee?
Answer: In the case of Merced Irrigation District (MID), yes, and that allows you to contact MID whenever you want to start receiving the water again.
8. Question: What about farmers who have no access to surface water?
Answer: In some cases, farmers may be able to purchase surface water (depending on location and water rights for the surface water rights holder). If you have been using surface water, you are not considered a dormant user.
9. Question: Do the allocation estimate numbers reflect sustainable yield?
Answer: Yes, and these could be adjusted, for example the allocation could be increased if projects are implemented that are effective in increasing water supplies.
10. Question: What do you anticipate would be the relationship between an allocation for dormant users and the county process for issuing permits to drill a well.
Answer: The process to permit a new well is cumbersome. The intent of the allocation process would be to avoid making the process more cumbersome by adding additional steps.
11. Comment: The consultant team and the GSAs will need to be very clear about what a dormant water right is. Also, when considering the allocation framework, it is important to consider the "climate" of the land (e.g., topography/geography).
12. Comment: You have growers on different types of soil. Some areas are very sandy, and others are not. The allocation should be done by soil type. Different soil types have different percolation rates and use different amounts of water to grow.
13. Comment: The trees (e.g., almonds) need a lot of water, the allocation could devastate people who grow trees. The allocation should take into consideration what people have already invested in developing their trees.
14. Comment: It would be helpful to have a crop map to see where you have permanent or seasonal crops.
15. Comment: It is really important to do a lot of public relations for people to not over pump before the allocation is implemented.
16. Comment: A lot of people in this basin feel like their water is being stolen by the state when it is their water, connected to their land and to their freedom as Americans.

Presentation 4 – Projects and Management Actions

Alyson Watson, Woodward & Curran, explained that there are 47 different projects being evaluated. There are three categories of projects: recharge projects, surface water projects, and actions to reduce water demand. Examples of projects in each category were provided.

1. Question: What about looking at the recharge efforts in Fresno?
Answer: Hicham ElTal, MID, noted that there are a lot of opportunities for putting water on the ground for a few months (during the rainy season) and allowing recharge to happen. MID has two pilot recharge projects east and south of Planada underway now. MID also has landowners in El Nido who are interested in recharge projects. There are lots of opportunities, but the big question is funding, identifying lands that could be used, and timing.

2. Comment: One difficulty in implementing recharge projects is that many of the systems that deliver water to these areas are damaged or destroyed. This sounds good in concept, but it is difficult to implement because ability to get the water to the systems is difficult.

3. Question: Can the main MID canal be used for recharge?

Answer: Hisham ElTal, MID, explained that there are liability exposures with potential flood flows for MID that have to be overcome before this could happen.

4. Question: What does MID do with reclaimed water?

Answer: Hicham ElTal, MID, noted that reclaimed water is a possible source of supply, but it can be expensive and may not be acceptable for some crops (e.g., almonds). The reclaimed water goes to refuges and duck clubs. From a basin wide perspective, it does not account for a lot of water supply - about 3,000 AF from the City of Merced.

5. Comment: The commenter has heard that the state is going to declare that all of the water belongs to the state.

Response: Hicham ElTal, MID clarified that, if the region is not successful in reaching sustainability by 2040, the state will come in and manage the water for the Subbasin.