



# CHOWCHILLA SUBBASIN STAFF ASSESSMENT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**April 2025**

## SGMA Background

The mission and responsibility of the State Water Board is to preserve, enhance, and restore the quality of California’s water resources and protect them for all current and future generations. In 2014, the state Legislature passed the historic Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) that established a new framework for how groundwater would be managed locally at the basin scale to achieve long-term sustainability. SGMA authorizes local public agencies to form Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSAs) in alluvial groundwater basins and requires that basins designated as high-priority and medium-priority by the California Department of Water Resources (DWR) be managed by Groundwater Sustainability Plans (GSPs). These local agencies are responsible for the sustainable management of their groundwater basins; however, state agencies are responsible for ensuring local groundwater management achieves SGMA's goals.

Under SGMA, DWR is responsible for reviewing GSPs to determine if local actions will be adequate to achieve the sustainable use of groundwater. If DWR finds management in a basin to be inadequate to remedy the unsustainable use of groundwater, DWR’s inadequate determination will trigger the State Water Board’s state intervention process. When a basin is determined to be inadequate, Board staff begin working with the GSAs to correct deficiencies identified in the GSAs’ plan or implementation of the plan. If the State Water Board determines the GSAs adequately addressed groundwater management issues, the Board may release a subbasin from the State Water Boards process and return it to DWR’s jurisdiction. Otherwise, the State Water Board may, through a noticed public hearing process, designate the basin as “probationary” under SGMA and collect groundwater pumping information and fees from extractors in the basin. After one year of probationary status, the Board may develop and adopt an interim plan that directly manages pumping in the basin. State intervention is a process that could result in the State Water Board temporarily managing and protecting groundwater resources until local agencies are able and willing to do so adequately. State intervention is in addition to local management and intended to be temporary. The goal of the state intervention process is to ensure the sustainable use of groundwater

and return a basin to local management as soon as local actions are sufficient achieve sustainability. Section 1 of this State Water Board Staff Assessment (Staff Assessment) contains more detail on the state intervention process.

## Chowchilla Subbasin

The Chowchilla Subbasin is located in the central portion of the San Joaquin Valley, in Madera and Merced counties, and contains the city of Chowchilla (Figure ES-1). Since time immemorial, the following California Native American Tribes have had cultural, traditional, or ancestral connections to the Chowchilla Subbasin: Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, Big Sandy Rancheria of Western Mono Indians, Dumna Wo-Wah Tribal Government, North Fork Rancheria of Mono Indians, North Valley Yokuts Tribe, Picayune Rancheria of Chukchansi Indians, Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation, Tule River Indian Tribe, and Wuksache Indian Tribe/Eshom Valley Band<sup>1</sup>.

The Chowchilla Subbasin is managed by four GSAs, and the primary uses of groundwater within the subbasin are for irrigated agriculture and drinking water. During most years, irrigated agriculture accounts for more than 97% of groundwater use in the subbasin<sup>2</sup>. The subbasin is critically overdrafted, which means that groundwater is pumped out of the subbasin faster than it is recharged by rain and other sources. On average, the amount pumped from the subbasin in a year is 100,600 acre-feet greater than the amount recharged. Overdraft can cause the land surface to sink, potentially damaging infrastructure and reducing aquifer storage. In addition, overdraft threatens groundwater levels and drinking water quality and could have disparate impacts on communities that rely on shallow wells. Due to historic and political factors, many of these are economically disadvantaged and communities of color. The subbasin has an estimated population of 19,099 people as of 2022 with majority of the population reporting as Hispanic or Latino (48.3%) and white (40.7%)<sup>3</sup>. The average annual household income within the subbasin in 2022 is \$67,495, which is significantly less than the state average of \$91,905<sup>4</sup>.

## Issues with 2022 Groundwater Sustainability Plan

The state intervention process for the Chowchilla Subbasin was triggered in March 2023 when DWR determined the subbasin's 2022 GSP was inadequate and identified multiple deficiencies in the GSP. DWR identified issues regarding the local agencies' plans for managing for the chronic lowering of groundwater levels and land subsidence (land sinking due to groundwater pumping). State Water Board staff reviewed the 2022 GSP and determined that implementing the 2022 GSP would result in additional

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<sup>1</sup> Native American Heritage Commission, Personal Communication, May 11, 2023

<sup>2</sup> Chowchilla Subbasin Sustainable Groundwater Management Act Groundwater Sustainability Plan, p. 2-105

<sup>3</sup> American Community Survey 5-Year Data (2018-2022)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

groundwater level declines, potential impacts to drinking water wells, and damage to subbasin infrastructure, such as canals and levees, through continued land subsidence

## 2025 Groundwater Sustainability Plan Improvements

The GSAs released a revised draft GSP in August 2024, which they adopted with slight revisions in March 2025 (2025 GSP). State Water Board staff evaluated the 2025 GSP to determine if identified deficiencies were addressed.

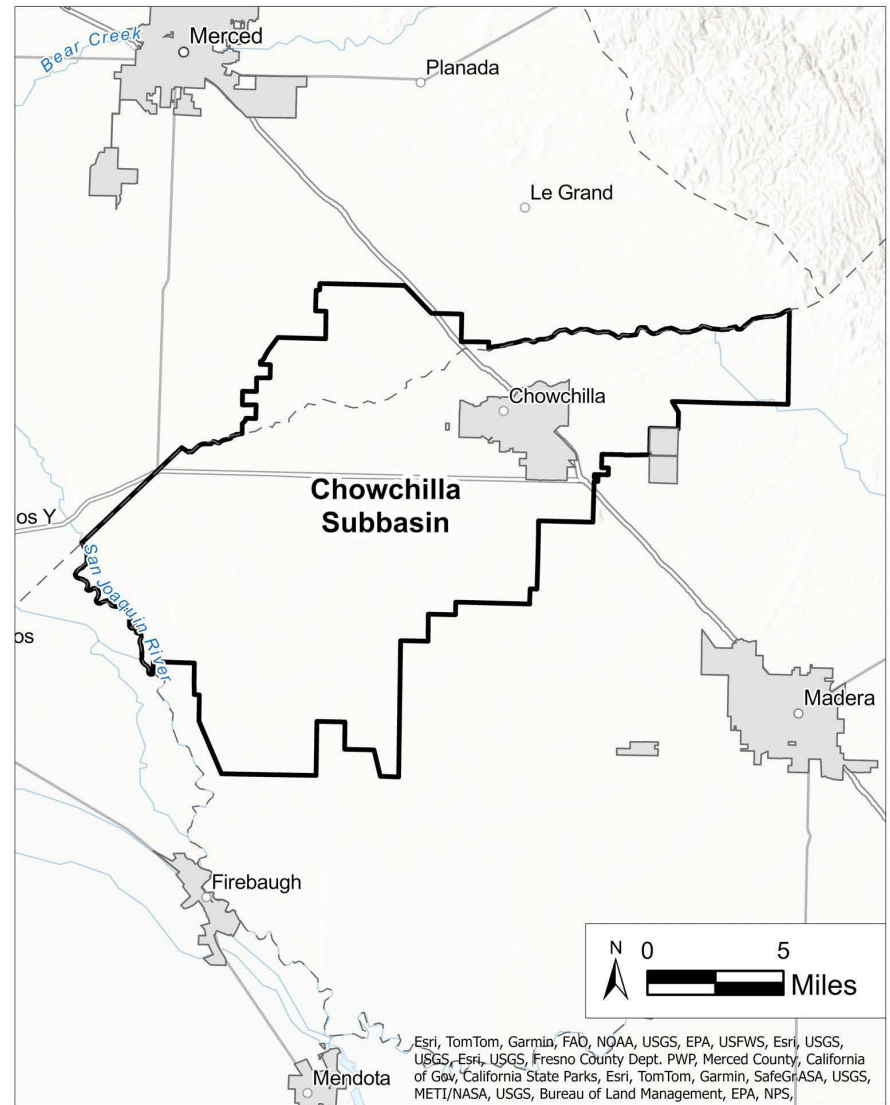
The GSAs made significant progress revising the 2025 GSP and adequately addressed deficiencies. Through the 2025 GSP, the GSAs show a greater commitment to protecting drinking water users and improved groundwater management. Some of the improvements the GSAs made in the 2025 GSP include:

- New groundwater level goals to avoid drinking water impacts after 2040.
- Where drinking water impacts occur, a commitment to addressing these impacts through the adoption of a more protective Domestic Well Mitigation Program that includes mitigating for water quality impacts in addition to impacts from lowering groundwater levels.
- Revised groundwater level goals that shouldn't cause additional land subsidence after 2040. New objectives to eliminate further subsidence and plans to limit subsidence impacts in the basin on the way to sustainability by 2040. The GSAs considered critical infrastructure when setting subsidence goals in the 2025 GSP.
- More robust management practices that should lead to sustainable groundwater use. For example, the GSAs committed to more adaptive and stricter groundwater management actions that will likely be necessary for the basin to reach sustainability.

## Staff Recommendations and Next Steps




State Water Board staff concludes the GSAs amended the GSP such that a probationary designation of the Chowchilla Subbasin is unnecessary and recommends the Board return the Subbasin to DWR's jurisdiction for continued evaluation of local management under SGMA. Section 1.2.1 of the Staff Assessment includes more information about returning the basin to DWR's jurisdiction.

GSAs must continue to evaluate their GSPs as they continue toward achieving sustainability. [Once a basin is returned to DWR's jurisdiction](#), the GSP will be periodically reviewed. Section 4 of the Staff Assessment includes recommendations for the GSAs to consider including in future GSP revisions to support improved groundwater management in the basin.



**Figure ES-1**  
**Overview of the**  
**Chowchilla Subbasin**

*Chowchilla Subbasin Staff Assessment*  
*April 2025*

-  Chowchilla Subbasin
-  Hydrologic Regions
-  Cities

