



KAWEAH SUBBASIN STAFF ASSESSMENT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

October 2025

SGMA Background

The mission and responsibility of the State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board or 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 local basin management to be inadequate to remedy the unsustainable use of groundwater, DWR's inadequate determination will initiate the State Water Board's state intervention process. When a basin GSP or GSPs is determined to be inadequate, Board staff will work with the GSAs to correct the 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 Board 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 to return a basin to local management as soon as local actions are sufficient to achieve sustainability. Section 1 of this State Water Board Staff Assessment (Staff Assessment) contains more detail on the state intervention process.

Kaweah Subbasin

The Kaweah Subbasin is located in the southern portion of the San Joaquin Valley, in Kings and Tulare Counties, and contains the cities of Visalia and Tulare (Figure 1). Since time immemorial, the following California Native American Tribes have had cultural, traditional, or ancestral connections to the Kaweah Subbasin: Big Sandy Rancheria of Western Mono Indians, Kings River Choinumni Farm Tribe, North Fork Mono Tribe, Santa Rosa Rancheria Tachi Yokut Tribe, Tule River Indian Tribe, and Wuksache Indian Tribe/Eshom Valley Band¹.

The Kaweah Subbasin is managed by three GSAs: East Kaweah GSA, Greater Kaweah GSA, and Mid-Kaweah GSA (collectively, the Kaweah GSAs or GSAs). Each GSA wrote their own GSP and the three GSPs are tied together by a coordination agreement. The primary use of groundwater within the subbasin is irrigated agriculture; in 2020, irrigated agriculture used more than 94 percent of the groundwater use in the subbasin². The subbasin is critically overdrafted, which means that groundwater is pumped out of the subbasin faster than it is recharged by precipitation and other sources. On average, the amount pumped from the subbasin in a year is 104,000 acre-feet greater than the amount recharged³. 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 shallower groundwater levels. Due to historic and political factors, many of these are economically disadvantaged and communities of color. As of 2022, the subbasin has an estimated population of 296,632 people with most of the population being Hispanic or Latino (60.6%) followed by white (31%)⁴. The average annual household income within the subbasin in 2022 is \$71,000, which is significantly less than the state average of \$91,551⁵.

¹ Native American Heritage Commission, Personal Communication, May 11, 2023

² 2024 Kaweah Subbasin Coordination Agreement, Appendix 1, p. 27

³ 2024 Greater Kaweah GSP, p. 1-1

⁴ American Community Survey 5-Year Data (2018-2022)

⁵ Ibid.

Issues with the 2022 Groundwater Sustainability Plans

The state intervention process for the Kaweah Subbasin was initiated in March 2023 when DWR determined the subbasin's 2022 GSPs were inadequate and identified multiple deficiencies in the GSPs (Inadequate Determination). 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 GSPs and determined that implementing the 2022 GSPs would result in additional groundwater level declines, water quality impacts to drinking water wells, damage to subbasin infrastructure (e.g. canals and levees) through continued land subsidence, and potential depletions of interconnected surface water.

In 2024, Board staff released the Kaweah Subbasin Probationary Hearing Draft Staff Report (Draft Staff Report). In the Draft Staff Report, Board staff agreed with DWR's Inadequate Determination and recommended the State Water Board designate the subbasin as probationary at the January 7, 2025, probationary hearing⁶. In the Draft Staff Report, Board staff summarized the recommended actions the State Water Board could take at the probationary hearing, including designating the entire subbasin probationary, requiring meters to measure extraction from certain groundwater extractors, and reporting extractions to the State Water Board⁷.

2024 Groundwater Sustainability Plan Improvements

Since DWR's Inadequate Determination, Board staff met routinely with the GSAs to discuss the deficiencies identified in the Draft Staff Report and provide feedback on potential solutions. The GSAs released two rounds of amended draft GSPs for Board staff to review and for public comment, the first in June 2024 and second in October 2024. The GSAs adopted their 2024 GSPs on November 13, 2024. Staff noted significant progress in a preliminary review of these GSPs, and the Board cancelled the hearing scheduled for January 7, 2025, to allow staff to conduct a thorough review.

Board staff evaluated the 2024 GSPs and determined that the GSAs made significant progress in their revisions. Through the 2024 GSPs, the GSAs show a greater commitment to protecting drinking water users, mitigating for declining groundwater impacts, and improved groundwater management. Some of the improvements the GSAs made in the 2024 GSPs include:

- Setting limits for groundwater extractors through allocations to reduce pumping.

⁶ 2024 Kaweah Subbasin Probationary Hearing Draft Staff Report, pp. 14-21

⁷ Ibid.

- Engaging with community members and environmental justice groups when changing groundwater management strategies.
- Establishing a mitigation program for drinking water wells and critical infrastructure adversely affected by declining groundwater levels, land subsidence, and groundwater quality degradation.
- Transitioning irrigation pumping away from the lower aquifer to eliminate active subsidence.
- Considering the vulnerability of domestic well users in both the upper and lower aquifer.
- Addressing groundwater quality concerns by agreeing to sample monitoring wells twice a year for an expanded list of constituents.
- Making significant progress to address impacts to interconnected surface water and to resolve data gaps.

Staff Recommendations and Next Steps

Board staff concludes that the GSAs amended their 2024 GSPs such that a probationary designation of the Kaweah Subbasin is not necessary. Board staff recommends the Board return the Kaweah 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. The GSPs will be periodically reviewed once a basin is returned to DWR's jurisdiction. Section 4 of the Staff Assessment includes recommendations for the GSAs to consider in future GSP revisions to improve groundwater management in the basin.

