

TEHAMA COUNTY SUBBASINS - SUSTAINABLE GROUNDWATER MANAGEMENT

Well Registration Public Workshop

Meeting Outcomes

February 8, 2023 | 6:00-8:00 pm

Red Bluff Community Center, 1500 S Jackson St, Red Bluff, CA 96080, plus online listen-in only option

Links: [GSA webpage](#) | [Presentation Slide Deck](#) | Meeting Recording: [Presentation Only](#); [Full Meeting](#)

Meeting Overview

- The Tehama County Flood Control and Water Conservation District (District) hosted a meeting to educate residents about the Tehama County Well Registration Program and provide an opportunity to fill out well registration forms with help from a county staff person.
- The meeting provided information on the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act.
- Most of the public's questions and comments expressed strong concerns with the well registration programs and sought to better understand related regulations and policies. Others shared comments expressing their appreciation for County staff's efforts given the challenging necessity to sustainably manage the County's groundwater.

Meeting Background & Purpose

On February 8, 2023, the Tehama County Groundwater Sustainability Agency (GSA) hosted a public meeting to educate residents and well owners about the County's well registration program, and to support well owners in filling out their registration forms. Signing in to the meeting was optional, but County staff and consultants estimated over 200 attendees in person. Fifty attendees listened in online. Most participants were domestic well owners and many were new to the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA).

SGMA Implementation & Well Registration Presentation

Justin Jenson, Tehama County GSA Project Manager, provided an overview of the Tehama County GSA Well Registration Program – reviewing how the program came to be and the impetus for it under SGMA.

GSA Well Registration Program

- On June 20, 2022, the Tehama County Flood Control and Water Conservation District (District) Board of Directors adopted Resolution No. 9-2022 setting the annual fee to be charged by the Tehama County GSA for the administrative costs of the Tehama County GSA Well Registration Program.
- An annual fee of \$0.29 per acre for each legal parcel in the Tehama County GSA will be added to the tax rolls and collected in the same manner as ordinary ad valorem taxes.

After the presentation, Mr. Jenson responded to resident questions and comments. Attendees had the opportunity to receive support in filling out their forms and to provide suggestions for improving outreach and education about the well registration program.

Key points raised in response to questions and concerns:

- The well registration program will help address major information gaps about groundwater wells in the county. Without adequate information, it is not possible to set a reasonable proportional fee across all groundwater users, including major agricultural operations.
- Data collected through the well registration program will be used to support the development of a well size/type-based funding mechanism to provide long-term funding for the GSA. All properties that extract groundwater will be levied a fee. All future fees will be approved by the District Board of Directors at public meetings, with opportunities for public comment. The GSA is not gathering well information to require metering wells.
- The fee is not the only source for funding SGMA implementation. The GSA has and will continue to pursue grants, leverage partnerships, etc. to help minimize costs to residents.
- Maintaining the status quo means unsustainable groundwater supply and is not an option that benefits well owners in the long run.
- Small water users will be among the first to feel the impacts of unmanaged groundwater use; to protect small users, the GSA needs to know where they are; the GSA cannot manage what is not measured.

Participant Comments and Questions

Most of the questions and comments expressed strong concerns with the well registration program and seeking to better understand related regulations and policies. A few comments expressed appreciation for County staff's efforts due to the need to sustainably manage the County's groundwater. A summary of comments and questions is below, edited for succinctness. Similar questions and responses have been combined.

Well Registration Program Structure and Implementation

- Many well owners asked about the benefits they would receive for registering their wells. Staff responded that knowing how many active wells and their associated sizes will help the county to manage groundwater effectively (e.g., minimize the occurrence of dry wells and other undesirable effects throughout the county).
- There was a question regarding whether the registration fee would go towards maintaining wells. Staff explained the well registration fee is intended to cover only what is necessary to help manage our groundwater levels. Additional services would require raising the fee.
- Many asked about the implications if they did not register their wells. In the absence of this information, staff explained the County would have to assign a presumptive fee to wells; then the onus is on the well owner to provide information to correct any inaccuracies. Staff underscored that the County needs everyone to share data about their wells for all well owners to contribute proportionally for well size/type. If too few well owners register, Tehama County may not be able to set up a functional program, and the State may need to take over sustainable groundwater management. The State program will cost well owners more than the County program.
- Concerns were shared regarding whether the GSA can manage the program and fees effectively and efficiently while also ensuring the program's transparency and accountability.
- Several concerns expressed that gathering well information will eventually lead to additional government management actions (e.g., metering and charging for water use). Staff acknowledged these concerns and underscored the GSA is not requiring metering

- A couple asked if de minimis users are exempt under SGMA, why do they need to register their wells. Staff explained that one of the challenges is that the County does not have a way to know who are de minimis users without those users registering their wells.

Well Registration Funding Structure and Sources

- Many individuals shared concerns about fairness and financial costs (e.g., questioning why they are being charged when they use little to no groundwater, invested in water conservation/efficiency strategies, may have to pay to deepen wells, were not the source of the groundwater problem, and are already burdened financially). Staff acknowledged these concerns and challenges. Staff explained the purpose of the well registration is to have equitable distribution of the cost for registering wells. The exact fee structure is still under discussion, so the public is strongly encouraged to attend and share their thoughts at future Groundwater Commission and District Board meetings.
- Several asked about the fee charge frequency and the potential to change over time. Staff responded that the fee still needs to be voted on by the District Board, but there is reason to believe it may be once per year, and it is likely the fee rate will change in the future to accommodate for changes in costs.

Roles, Responsibilities, and Authorities

- Several stated they felt requiring property owners to disclose well information seems to exceed the scope of SGMA. Staff pointed to CA Water Code 10726, which allows the County to ask for this information.
- Multiple individuals conveyed that despite claims of local control, this feels like the State is really “holding the reins.” Staff said that if the GSA creates a groundwater management program that works well, the State will not intervene. It benefits the state for locals to run their own programs.
- There was a question about whether SGMA affects existing water or mineral rights. Staff explained that oil and mineral rights are completely legally separate from water rights; neither will be affected by well registration.
- Individuals were interested in how other counties are implementing well registration programs. Staff noted many other GSAs around the state are implementing well registration programs, though not all GSAs are administered by counties. Some GSAs are irrigation districts and already have the kind of well data that Tehama County is seeking.
- There were a few concerns about ensuring neighboring jurisdictions manage their groundwater in a way that does not negatively impact Tehama County groundwater. Staff explained that while Tehama County does not have legal authority over others’ groundwater management, SGMA does require neighboring GSAs to coordinate because actions in one groundwater basin do affect others. Tehama County works closely with Butte and Shasta GSAs for this reason.

Involvement & Decision-Making Process

- Several sought information on how to stay involved, learn more, and express their viewpoints to decision-makers. Staff reviewed several means of contact, including the website (tehamacountywater.org/gsa/), Mr. Jenson’s contact (530.690.0700 ext. 201), and District Board/GSA and Groundwater Commission meetings (see below for upcoming meetings).
- Many indicated they felt their views were not adequately represented and considered; they felt the decision-making process lacked transparency and accountability.

Other Groundwater Management Actions and Groundwater Conditions

- Many voiced concerns about heavy-water users and/or out-of-region interests (e.g., large agribusinesses and other companies, like bottled water companies, based outside of the county) and overall transfer of water from northern to southern California.
- Many advocated for prioritizing management of heavy water use (e.g., new agricultural well moratorium) before charging all well owners.
- Various individuals suggested specific remediation and management actions to pursue, including allowing residents to collect rainwater for use and localized recharge, increasing the allowable well depth, etc.
- A member of the public pointed to habitat health and concern about riparian areas becoming desert.
- Water quality concerns were raised related to ensuring appropriate processing before recharging (e.g., processing recycled water, water treated with chemicals, or river water impacted by homeless camps). Staff noted that there are strict rules about what water can be used for recharge.
- There was a question about dam removal and its effect on groundwater levels. Staff responded that exact impacts are unclear, and the GSA has no authority over dam management.
- An individual asked about the state helicopter surveys conducted last year. Staff shared that data from the Airborne Electromagnetic (AEM) surveys (conducted by CA Department of Water Resources) should be available in the next couple of months:
<https://water.ca.gov/programs/sgma/aem>.

Outreach

Participants provided suggestions for how to improve outreach to inform all well owners of the registration program:

- The County should send informational mailers to everyone before the registration program.
- Create an online public forum for residents to express themselves and share information with one another.
- To reach Spanish-speaking Tehama County residents, work with the County Office of Health Services or work with local manufacturing/food packaging plant owners to reach immigrant employees.
- Provide more means of outreach to individuals without internet access or computer literacy.
- Improve website materials, and post meeting details sooner.
- Increase advertising of meetings.

Next Steps

Mr. Jenson thanked the group for attending. The workshop recording and summary will be posted to the GSA website. Well registration forms are due March 31. Relevant upcoming meetings include:

- February 27 at 11:00a – District Board of Supervisors
- March 20 at 11:00a – District Board of Supervisors
- March 22 at 8:30a – Groundwater Commission