

POSITION STATEMENT ON SONOMA COUNTY GROUNDWATER ISSUES -- SONOMA COUNTY WATER COALITION

Water is a shared finite public trust resource. Unregulated and unmanaged exploitation of groundwater, a vital resource, has led to a crisis in Sonoma County. Well drillers drill ever deeper to find water. Increasingly, residents in rural areas have lowered pump depths in their wells, replaced dry wells with new deeper wells, or, as a last resort, depend on water deliveries by truck. Springs are drying up. Creeks and streams once teeming with life are now dry in the summer and fall. Domestic well owners are affected, as are many endangered and threatened species that depend on water. Effective groundwater management should make it unnecessary for neighbors to continue competing to drill the deepest well.

The courts have held that cities and counties may regulate and manage groundwater for beneficial use at the local level. More than two-dozen California counties, including Napa County, have groundwater ordinances. Sonoma County's General Plan Update offers an opportunity to construct effective policy needed to respond to this crisis over the next 20 years.

The Sonoma County Water Coalition supports the following positions on groundwater, and recommends that they be incorporated into the Water Resource Element of the General Plan Update:

1. Systematic and comprehensive groundwater basin studies by the U.S. Geological Survey, such as now underway and proposed, and collection of groundwater data by neighborhood associations under expert guidance, with full integration of local, state, and federal resources and consideration of all stakeholder interests, including those of domestic well-owners in unincorporated areas.

2. A countywide policy for sustainable groundwater management, which must include substantial and measurable demand reduction, based on evidence of groundwater overdraft. The management policy should consist of two primary elements:

Specific groundwater management plans for each of the major groundwater basins in the County including but not limited to: the Santa Rosa Valley, Sonoma Valley, Petaluma Valley, Napa-Sonoma mountains and hills, the Alexander Valley, the Wilson Grove Formation Highlands bordering the Laguna de Santa Rosa and the Gualala Basin.

- b) Administrative and legal support for residents of outlying water-scarce areas to create locally elected and controlled groundwater management districts for administering correlative water rights by establishing programs to monitor, meter, conserve, and increase natural groundwater recharge. Natural groundwater recharge is defined as: increasing groundwater quantity by natural percolation of rainfall or by surface irrigation so as not to have any significant impact on groundwater quality.

3. Land use policies that protect or enhance the historical recharge rates of State-

identified natural groundwater recharge areas in the County. Acquisition and enhancement of designated or otherwise known groundwater recharge areas should be included in the mandate of the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District.

4. Requirements for new development and construction, based on county-wide studies and local data collection, to halt loss of groundwater recharge capacity of aquifers caused by developments that increase impervious surfaces. Proactive measures are required to reduce negative impacts of impervious surfaces and encourage land use practices that increase natural groundwater recharge. These objectives must be incorporated in building codes administered by the Sonoma County Permit and Resource Management Department.

5. The prohibition of intentional underground injection of treated wastewater or other contaminants that may degrade aquifers within the County.

6. A modified CEQA process of discretionary regulation to address the cumulative impacts of new agricultural wells and new residential wells on existing water users and upon creeks in all areas of the County.

7. Specific deadlines for studies to be commissioned, reports to be submitted and mitigation adopted in the 'special study areas' proposed in the draft Water Resource Element.

8. County intervention on behalf of residents in unincorporated areas experiencing adverse effects of municipal groundwater pumping.

9. A resolution by the County to ultimately manage water resources for long-term sustainability within specific watersheds and local groundwater basins, and within this decade, cease any further import/export based on the results of groundwater data, basin studies and water budget models.

10. Public education programs to provide all County residents with information regarding the finite nature of water resources and guidance for the sustainable use of that resource. Water saved by conservation, efficiency and reuse should be dedicated to the environment by being left untapped in the source groundwater and surface water.