# **Celebrating the 20-Year Anniversary** of the Sacramento Groundwater Authority

The Sacramento Groundwater Authority (SGA) was created in 1998 to manage Sacramento County's North Area groundwater basin.

At the time SGA was established, the region's water supplies and environmental resources were on an unsustainable path. Forecasts showed the region would experience some of the fastest population growth in the state. Water providers were heavily dependent upon the Lower American River for water supplies and were projecting the need to tap the river even more heavily in the coming years.

At the same time, groundwater levels in much of the region were

declining steadily. By the 1990s, groundwater tables had fallen as much as 90 feet from historic levels in some parts of unincorporated Sacramento County. Groundwater supplies were also facing threats from contaminant plumes at McClellan Air Force Base and Aerojet.

From these times and conditions emerged the Water Forum negotiations in 1993. That year, stakeholders began facilitated discussions with the goal of developing an agreement to balance the co-equal objectives of providing a reliable and safe water supply for the Sacramento region's long-term growth and economic health, and preserving the fishery, wildlife, recreational, and aesthetic values of the Lower American River.



Groundwater management was recognized as critical to meeting the Water Forum's objectives, which hinged upon the ability of water providers to reduce the amount of water drawn from the American River during dry years.

The North Area groundwater

basin underlies the northern

part of Sacramento County

rely on groundwater to meet

where nearly 500,000 residents

about half of their water needs.

In order to reduce surface water diversions, the region would need to develop a conjunctive use program, which coordinates the use of surface water and groundwater resources: During wet years, water providers use more surface water, allowing the groundwater basin to recharge, and during dry years, water providers use more groundwater, allowing more surface water to flow down the American River.

In order to have a conjunctive use program, the region would need a healthy groundwater basin.



Regional Water Win -NEW GROUNDWATER STRATEGY OFFERS HOPE FOR FUTURE

#### In what stands as a model for the state, local government agencies and water districts have designed a plan that successfully balances the need to preserve river water for fish and to provide more water for growth. This month the city and county of Sacramento and the Folsom and Citrus Heights councils will review this plan. The proposal represents a clear win for these local leaders and for the region as a whole.

## **An Innovative Groundwater Management Authority Emerges**

In August 1998, the cities of Sacramento, Folsom, and Citrus Heights, and the County of Sacramento signed a joint powers agreement (JPA) establishing the Sacramento North Area Ground Water Management Authority (SNAGMA) to tackle the complex groundwater issues the region faced. Two years later, the name changed to the Sacramento Groundwater Authority.

When SGA was established, the Sacramento Bee said, "New Groundwater Strategy Offers Hope for the Future," calling SGA "a model for the state." Groundwater basins in California were largely unregulated, with the exception of adjudicated basins that had undergone decades of costly legal proceedings. Never before had a JPA been used in California for groundwater management.

Another innovative feature was the involvement of non-public agencies in SGA's governance. At the time, groundwater law prohibited organizations such as investor-owned water utilities and mutual water companies from having a role in groundwater management. SGA's pioneering structure provided a way for all groundwater users to have a voice in the basin's management.

Sixteen years later SGA became a model for the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), California's landmark law that empowers local agencies to sustainably manage groundwater.



#### Sustainable Groundwater Levels

Chief among SGA's accomplishments is the development of a Water Accounting Framework, which helped assign an equitable level of responsibility among groundwater pumpers to bring the basin into balance. This framework helps ensure that the once over-drafted basin is maintained at levels that are sustainable.



#### **Safeguarding Water Quality**

One of SGA's core responsibilities is to safeguard groundwater quality. SGA identifies and tracks groundwater contamination by continually reviewing water quality data from local water providers, evaluating regional conditions and identifying emerging regional trends or threats to water quality and public health. SGA established the Regional Contamination Issues Committee (RCIC) a forum for water providers, regulators and responsible parties to raise issues and discuss solutions for dealing with groundwater contamination. The group has met continually since 2004 and has resulted in several studies and programs to evaluate and remediate groundwater contamination.



#### Complying with the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act

The original SGA framework also has allowed the Sacramento region to seamlessly and smoothly comply with SGMA. SGA in 2016 became the exclusive Groundwater Sustainability Agency for the North Area groundwater basin. In addition, SGA is collaborating with neighboring groundwater management agencies in the larger North American Subbasin, which includes portions of Sutter and Placer counties, to develop a groundwater sustainability plan to help comply with SGMA.

#### **New Innovations**

Looking ahead, the groundwater management framework and partnership through SGA is positioning the Sacramento region to address water management challenges and opportunities ahead. SGA's conjunctive use program, for example, provides a hedge against water supply shortages that could be exacerbated by climate change. With climate change, surface water supplies will become more variable as storms are warmer and earlier in the season, making it more difficult to store runoff in Folsom Reservoir for use during the long dry summers.



SGA's conjunctive use program provides a means for water providers to store—or bank—more water in the groundwater basin during wet years, so that it is available when needed. In dry periods, the region will rely more heavily on previously banked water in the groundwater aquifer, leaving more for fish and wildlife in the American River.

## Recovery Period Groundwater Level Water Level Water Eevel Water Bank

### **A Lasting Partnership**

The Sacramento region has come a long way since the 1990s when groundwater levels and quality were on an unsustainable path. The region's once over-drafted groundwater basin is now stable and sustainable. SGA's successful conjunctive use program allows water providers to shift to using more groundwater during dry times to achieve the Water Forum's coequal goals. And, SGA is continuing to provide a forum for dealing collaboratively with groundwater contamination. We look forward to continuing our partnership though SGA and this track record of success to meet the challenges to come.