County of Santa Cruz

Water Advisory Commission

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2024 – 2025 Work Plan DRAFT

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OVERVIEW

Consistent with its bylaws, the Water Advisory Commission (WAC) will focus on priority water resource related issues, policies and projects, with the intent of taking one or more of the following actions:

- Advise the Board of Supervisors (BOS) on issues related to water resources.
- Work cooperatively with county departments, other county commissions, public and private agencies, and concerned members of the public, to formulate advice to the BOS.
- Serve as an information clearinghouse for the BOS and other County commissions.
- Advise the BOS on potential areas of cooperation with other public and private agencies and organizations.
- Provide a public forum to educate the WAC and the community on water issues.
- Support the work of County staff in implementing water resource programs.
- Monitor and evaluate implementation of key policies and programs and advise the BOS as needed.
- Proactively identify water resource issues of concern that are not being addressed by other advisory bodies to the BOS.

BACKGROUND

The Water Advisory Commission (Commission) was established in 1975 to serve as a policy advisory body to the BOS on issues relating to the use and protection of the county's water resources. The Commission consists of seven members, five of whom are concerned citizens appointed by individual supervisors and two that are appointed at large. The two at large positions represent public water purveyors (200 or more connections) and private or mutual water companies (five to 199 connections) in the County. The Environmental Health Services (EHS) Division of the Health Services Agency provides staff support for the Commission. In July 2024, Sierra Ryan, Water Resources Manager, is serving as lead staff.

Staffing, funding, and other resources available to the Commission necessarily limit the

duties and responsibilities of the Commission. Therefore, the Commission utilizes discretion in devoting time to those activities that are most important to achieving its overall goal of enhancing and preserving Santa Cruz County water resources. County departments including Environmental Health and Community Development and Infrastructure will assist the Commission in its work, by including the Commission in water related correspondence with the BOS, and by having staff provide timely oral reports on pending issues. For more information about the Commission visit its webpage:
https://scceh.com/Home/Programs/WaterResources/WaterAdvisoryCommission.aspx

PRIORITY ISSUES

1. WATER QUALITY

Background

The creation and maintenance of a sustainable water supply is not solely about the availability of water. In some cases, consumers have access to water, but that water is not safe to drink due to various water quality issues. Also, fFederal and state water regulatory agencies have, over time, added to and tightened regulations for water quality such that water sources that were once considered potable no longer meet water quality standards. While larger water providers generally have the required resources and infrastructure to measure water quality and comply with changing standards, compliance with current water quality standards can create a significant operational and financial burden for small water companies and individual well owners. In many cases, the cost of compliance with new Maximum Contaminant Levels (MCLs) is onerous enough to put a small water company at risk of bankruptcy or make potable water unaffordable for an individual well owner. The California Department of Water Resources has taken the position that the primary solution to these problems should be consolidation of small water companies and individual well owners into larger water providers. Water systems considering consolidation, however, often face many operational, financial and political hurdles which prevent consideration of consolidation until the situation becomes an "emergency". Current water quality issues in Santa Cruz County include, but not limited to:

1. High Nitrate levels – Many well owners and small water companies have Nitrate levels near or above the 10Mg/L (Nitrate as N) MCL due to agricultural or septic system effluents near their water source.
2. Chromium 6 – Chromium 6 occurs naturally at 15-30 ppb in several Santa Cruz County aquifers. Historical MCL's of 50 or 100 ppb did not require mitigation of Chrome 6. Recent proposed changes of the MCL from 50 to 10 ppb will require expensive treatment to meet.
3. PFAS Compounds – PFAS "forever" compounds are just gaining

recognition as water contaminants and have resulted in multi-billion dollar lawsuits with companies like 3M. Testing and quality standards are fairly new and many water companies are just discovering that they may have PFAS contamination.

4. Salt Water Intrusion – Salt water intrusion is a well-known issue within Santa Cruz County. While largely managed by the Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSA's), salt water intrusion can be a major issue for coastal private well owners, small water companies, and large water districts.
5. Biological Contaminants – Biological contaminants including E coli and Enterococcus, affect both drinking water and health hazards for recreational waters.
6. Harmful Algal Blooms – These naturally occurring processes can create toxins resulting in health hazards for recreational waters.
7. Other emerging contaminants – Federal and state water agencies may add to the list of potential new water contaminants and/or update the MCL's for existing contaminants resulting in new regulations and compliance issues.

<u>WAC Role</u>

The WAC should gain first-hand knowledge of the details of water quality issues in the County, including the current MCL's/standards, the effects of contaminants in excess of the standards, and the procedures, equipment and costs required to test and treat water to within those standards. The WAC should identify and understand who, within Santa Cruz County, is affected by these water quality issues including, in particular, small water providers and well-owners. The WAC should receive reports on research, and advocate for policies and grant funding to help county water users, particularly small and disadvantaged water systems and well owners, comply with water quality standards. The WAC should educate the BOS about water quality issues and resources for compliance, and help the BOS understand the hurdles of well owners and small water companies related to both water treatment and consolidation to help prevent "emergency" situations like Big Basin Water Company.

2. SUSTAINABLE GROUNDWATER MANAGEMENT

Background

The Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), codified at Water Code §§10720 et seq., required that groundwater basins form Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSAs) by 2015 and develop and implement plans to achieve sustainability. Santa Cruz County includes several groundwater basins as identified by the California Department of Water Resources, some of which are high priority and managed; others are low priority and not managed, click here for a map viewer. Groundwater basins in the county managed by a GSA include the Santa Margarita Basin, the Santa Cruz Mid-County Basin, and the Corralitos Basin.

From north to south, the three GSAs that exist within the County are: the Santa Margarita Groundwater Agency (est. 2015), the Santa Cruz Mid-County Groundwater Agency (est. 2015), and the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency (est. 1984). The County, while not a water purveyor, is involved in each of the three GSAs, either directly via a joint powers authority, or indirectly by means of committee-level participation. The County has the responsibility of reviewing and approving well permit applications, and many domestic wells as well as small state systems are located in unincorporated Santa Cruz County.

SGMA defines a sustainable groundwater basin as one that is not experiencing:

- Significant and unreasonable chronic lowering of groundwater levels indicating a depletion of supply
- Significant and unreasonable reduction of groundwater storage
- Significant and unreasonable seawater intrusion
- Significant and unreasonable degradation of groundwater quality
- Significant and unreasonable land subsidence
- Depletions of interconnected surface water that have significant and unreasonable adverse impacts on beneficial uses of the surface water

WAC Role

The WAC should maintain a focus on the issues of sustainable groundwater management, support regional supply planning efforts (especially in regard to developing conjunctive use and groundwater recharge opportunities), proactively engage the BOS in advancing support for sustainable regional water supply alternatives as they emerge, and advise the BOS as appropriate. The WAC should receive, review, and potentially accept regular reports from County staff and/or representatives from GSAs and the water purveyors within the County.

3. DROUGHT AND CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS ON WATER RESOURCES

Background

California's Fourth Climate Change Assessment, Central Coast Region Report (Langridge, 2018) states, "*The Central Coast Region is notable for its extensive natural ecosystems, many of which will be impacted by climate change. Hardwood forests, scrublands, and herbaceous grasslands comprise most of its land cover, with significantly less intensive agriculture and small-to medium-sized cities in the region. There is a strong demand for development in rural areas and agriculture is being developed on lands formerly supporting grazing or natural vegetation. The region continues to reflect an economic and social disconnect between prosperous coastal communities and agricultural areas with many low- income farm workers, inequalities that may result in disadvantaged groups suffering disproportionately from the impacts of climate change.*"

With respect to water resources, the report states that climate changes that will affect the Central Coast include:

- Temperatures, both maximums and minimums, are anticipated to increase through the next century, with greater increases in the inland region.
- Precipitation is expected to increase slightly, but precipitation variability will increase substantially.
- Atmospheric river events are expected to increase.
- Sea level is expected to continue rising.
- Fog impacts are uncertain.
- Droughts are predicted to remain a serious challenge to already stressed water supplies.
- Water supply shortages, already common during drought, will be exacerbated.

In 2023, approximately 273,132 people used 44,845 acre-feet of water (including agricultural uses) within the County. Groundwater accounted for 76% of the total supply, surface water accounted for 20%, and recycled water accounted for 3.6% (Santa Cruz County Water Resources Report for 2023). Drought conditions lead to less rainfall, and less groundwater recharge, and resulting increased water use. Increased groundwater production may lead to lowering of groundwater levels, increased seawater intrusion, groundwater quality degradation, subsidence, and loss of interconnectivity between surface streams and groundwater dependent ecosystems.

WAC Role

The WAC should maintain a focus on drought and climate change impacts on water resources and receive, review, and potentially accept reports from County staff and/or experts in the field. The WAC should proactively engage with the BOS on issues related to climate change impacts on water resources and advise the BOS.

On December 13, 2022, the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors adopted the Drought Response and Outreach Plan (DROP) as part of the Climate Action and Adaptation Plan. The DROP was created in response to SB 552, which requires Counties to develop plans to assess potential drought and water shortage risk and propose interim and long-term solutions for state small water systems and domestic wells within the county, including the following 5 elements:

(1) Consolidations for existing water systems and domestic wells.
(2) Domestic well drinking water mitigation programs.
(3) Provision of emergency and interim drinking water solutions.
(4) An analysis of the steps necessary to implement the plan.
(5) An analysis of local, state, and federal funding sources available to implement the plan

The role of the WAC is now to act as the standing task force, as required by SB552, which is confirming that the elements proposed in the DROP are implemented.

4. CONSOLIDATION

Background

Consolidation is the combining of two or more water systems. In general, consolidations involve a smaller water system being absorbed into a larger water system. As water infrastructure is aging, regulations and water quality monitoring

requirements are increasing, and finding qualified staff to operate water systems is becoming increasingly difficult, smaller water agencies may consider consolidation with a larger water agency to provide stable water service to its customers. Other reasons for consolidation can be a mandatory consolidation in the event of a water system failing to meet water quality standards, or failing to meet water supply requirements. The California State Water Resources Control Board may order mandatory consolidations for systems that are classified as a Public Water System or State Small Water System, the system serves a disadvantaged community, and the system consistently fails to provide an adequate supply of safe drinking water.

As there are a large number of small water systems in Santa Cruz County that may not have resources (technical, managerial, or financial, or any combination thereof) to provide consistent water supply, consolidation will likely become more widespread in the future.

WAC Role

The Water Advisory Commission should focus on the following activities related to water system consolidation:

a. Gain first hand knowledge of the details of a system that is looking to consolidate with a larger water system. Including what happens to the water system if the consolidation effort fails.
b. Gain first hand knowledge of the details of the larger water system that a smaller agency could potentially consolidate into. Including:
    i. The feasibility of connecting a larger system to a smaller system.
    ii. The challenges of expanding the system and taking on extra monitoring and maintenance of the smaller system.
c. Educate the County Supervisors, affected water users and other stakeholders regarding the processes for consolidation.
d. Advocate for policies and grant funding to assist small and large water systems with consolidation efforts.

5. COORDINATION WITH OTHER COUNTY COMMISSIONS

Background

In 2014, discussion was initiated between three County commissions (Commission on the Environment (COE), Fish and Wildlife Advisory Commission (FWAC) and Water Advisory Commission (WAC)) that have significant overlap in

their scopes regarding protection of water resources and related environmental issues. The Inter-Commission Coordination Working Group (ICCWG) was formed in an attempt to clarify the distinct and shared areas of focus of each commission.

In 2024, the BOS instituted a Commission Restructuring Process to try to improve the efficiency of the County's Commissions. As part of that process, the scope of the WAC and COE were modified and the overlaps between the three commissions reduced. This should keep the scope of the ICCWG to issues that are large and multi-faceted, making more efficient use of Commissioners time.

WAC Role

Developing the three commissions' alignment around positions on water resource management issues and identifying and maintaining discrete roles of the commissions respective to their particular subject matter expertise and bylaws should continue to be the focus of this work. The WAC should continue to participate in the ICCWG and joint commission meetings, focus on resolving joint strategies on issues that require coordination with other commissions, reduce redundancy in effort and find synergies with these other commissions' work where possible. This will ensure that the BOS is kept apprised of significant water resource management issues in a meaningful manner that is inclusive of other related significant issues the County currently faces (fisheries conservation and recovery, climate change adaptation, etc.)

6. OTHER ISSUES AS NEEDED (TBD)

Background

The WAC occasionally becomes aware of issues that warrant investigation and interaction with the BOS regarding County policy. While many of these issues fall within broader subject areas already on the WAC agenda, other issues may arise that are outside of the WAC's current scope. Two examples may include Karst Protection Zones and the Pajaro River Flood Protection Project.

WAC Role

While the County is well supported by knowledgeable policy-makers and other water stakeholder groups that can inform the BOS, the WAC is the only advisory body specifically focused on water resource management, as enabled by County code, and should maintain and strengthen that role with the BOS as much as possible. These somewhat urgent, new issues are not unusual, and maintaining the ability to respond to them in a timely manner is of great

importance to the WAC. The meeting frequency of the BOS and WAC often limits the opportunity for timely engagement on new issues, but the WAC should endeavor to maintain involvement in them, nonetheless. Specifically, the WAC should exercise the option to hold emergency meetings to address issues like this as they arise.