

## Guidance on Engaging and Communicating with Underrepresented Groundwater Users

*Effective community engagement will benefit Groundwater Sustainability Plan (GSP) development, annual reporting, and the implementation of projects. Special consideration should be given to ensure all groundwater users are engaged, including but not limited to, disadvantaged communities, private domestic well owners, small growers and farmers, Tribes, communities on small water systems, and other underrepresented individuals or groups.*

This guidance is provided as an enhancement to the January 2018 [Guidance Document for Groundwater Sustainability Plan Stakeholder Communication and Engagement](#)<sup>1</sup> (2018 Guidance Document). Similar to the 2018 Guidance Document, this guidance is not intended to prescribe specific outreach and communications methods for Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSA) or local agencies to follow, but to provide various examples for consideration. Other than what is required by statute or regulation (detailed in the box, to the right), GSAs have discretion on how they communicate and engage with, and consider the interests of, beneficial uses and users of groundwater within a basin.

Based on community feedback, Department of Water Resources (DWR) recognizes that there are groups or communities of groundwater users that have been historically and frequently left out from decision-making with regard to sustainable groundwater management. These groups include, but are not limited to: disadvantaged communities, private domestic well owners, small growers and farmers, Tribes, and communities on small water systems. All beneficial uses and users of groundwater must be part of the effort to achieve sustainability, and engagement should occur with all entities that could be affected by the implementation of a GSP.

### **Applicable Legislation and Regulations:**

**California Water Code 10723.2** The groundwater sustainability agency shall consider the interests of all beneficial uses and users of groundwater, as well as those responsible for implementing groundwater sustainability plans.

**23 Cal. Code Regs. §354.10 Notice and Communication.** Each Plan shall include a summary of information relating to notification and communication by the Agency with other agencies and interested parties including the following: (a) a description of the beneficial uses and users of groundwater in the basin, including the land uses and property interests potentially affected by the use of groundwater in the basin, the types of parties representing those interests, and the nature of consultation with those parties.

***Like any community, underrepresented communities are unique, with strengths and weaknesses; and the members are experts about their community, are proud of what they have, and are hopeful for a better future.***

<sup>1</sup>California Department of Water Resources plans to update the 2018 Guidance Document in 2021. The enhanced concepts presented here will be incorporated into the updated Guidance Document.

## Communication and Engagement Steps

Since some groundwater users have been historically and frequently left out of decision-making processes, a strategy of listening and sharing is necessary for a GSA to engage meaningfully and to establish trust and mutual understanding. The 2018 Guidance Document describes seven steps for communicating and engaging with communities. These seven steps are listed with suggested enhancements for engagement.

### 1. Enhancing the step: Set Goals and Desired Outcomes: Preparing for Public Engagement

- Have you recognized that engagement with all communities of groundwater users can require extra time and resources?
- What are the barriers you face, and opportunities you can take, when engaging members of the community?
  - » Some examples include: languages spoken, other time commitments, proximity to meeting locations, lack of broadband internet, resources sufficient to engage (time, transportation costs, childcare, meals, etc.), technical complexity, mistrust, or lack of awareness.
- Who can you assign to be consistently engaged with the community; listening, thinking through, and then reflecting what you have heard?
- What are you prepared to hear? How will you acknowledge visible anger and frustration due to injustices and lack of trust?
- Be prepared to revisit this step, after you have engaged your community.
  - » Do members of the community agree with how you defined the barriers and opportunities? What could change about your approach?

### 2. Enhancing the step: Identify the Interested Parties: Opportunity for Inclusion

- Do the tools for identifying communities align with on-the-ground reality? Do lines on the map define a community? Are any community members left out by the tools being used?
- Who has the community elected—formally or informally—to lead or represent them?

#### Tools for Identifying Interested Parties:

[DWR Disadvantaged Community Mapping Tool](#)  
[California Native American Heritage Commission](#)  
[State Water Board Human Right to Water Portal](#)  
[CalEnviroScreen](#)  
[US Census Bureau Data Portal](#)

- How have they been engaged by you or others in the recent past? The distant past?
  - If you aren't already engaged, who is someone trusted that can invite you into conversation with the community?
- ### 3. Enhancing the step: Interested Party Survey and Mapping: Hearing From Diverse Interests
- Members of communities are wise, proud, and hopeful, and will appreciate when you consider their strengths, not just their deficits. Are you ready to honor and respect community pride and assets in your engagement and communication?
  - Can you invite those you have engaged to co-create the process for further engagement, accepting their expertise about their community while you are asking them to accept your expertise about groundwater management?
  - To build and strengthen relationships with underrepresented groundwater users, how can you listen with humility and curiosity, being trustworthy and patient? What steps will you take to build mutual respect?
  - Have you learned so much here that it is time to go back to Step 1 to reconsider your goals and outcomes, and to reevaluate how you identified your interested parties?
- ### 4. Enhancing the step: Messages and Talking Points: Refining Messages Based on Community Need
- Are you communicating using words and concepts that you've heard members of the community using to describe themselves, and their goals?
  - Are you making sure to listen, and reflect what you hear, as people respond to your messages and talking points? Is there room to improve communication?

**5. Enhancing the step: Venues for Engaging: Meet Your Community Where They Are At**

- When you listened to the members of the community, where and how did they ask you to engage them?
- Where do members of the community already gather? Can these be places for engagement with you? Can you join the community as it gathers for other purposes?
- Can you provide a venue that is meaningful or useful to the community for things other than your engagement efforts?

**6. Enhancing the step: Implementation  
Timeframe Enhancements: Long-Term Public Engagement**

- Does your best-case timeline align with the community? If not, how can you adjust to meet their needs?
- Can the community help you in justifying a change in the timeline to meet their needs?
- How will you continue to engage your community throughout SGMA's long-term timeline?

**7. Enhancing the step: Evaluation and Assessment: Adapting to Community Needs**

- Evaluating the effectiveness of community engagement can be undertaken in partnership with members of the community, to affirm and deepen the trust established through the engagement effort. How are needs evaluated to address not just the goals of the GSA, but also the goals of the community?
- Does the community agree the engagement was successful? What evidence do they point to as signs of the successes or stumbles?
- Does the plan, report, effort, or project reflect the things that were heard from the community? Does the community agree that their input is reflected?