

## UPDATED: California governor signs groundwater management bills

<http://www.thepacker.com/fruit-vegetable-news/California-governor-signs-groundwater-management-bills-275320001.html#sthash.1lo911Z6.dpuf>

09/16/2014 12:55:00 PM

Vicky Boyd

Despite calls by some agricultural interests for vetoes, California Gov. Jerry Brown signed three pieces of legislation, Sept. 16, that will implement statewide groundwater management rules.

Until now, California was one of the few states without statewide groundwater oversight. The legislation, Senate Bills 1168 and 1319 and Assembly Bill 1739, establishes a definition of sustainable groundwater management and requires local agencies to adopt management plans for the state's major groundwater basins.



*Faced with no surface water supplies, many growers have had wells drilled.*

In overdrafted basins, sustainability plans would have to be in place by 2020, according to the legislation. In other major basins, the deadline is 2022.

By 2040, all high and medium priority groundwater basins must achieve sustainability, according to the legislation.

Groundwater comprises about one-third of the state's overall water supplies, according to state figures. Dave Puglia, Western Growers Association vice president of governmental affairs and communications, said growers probably won't see any effects from the bills for at least five years.

But there already have been discussions among groups, including the Irvine-based WGA, on possible clean-up legislation next session to address errors or omissions.

One missing item the governor already has mentioned is a need to streamline basin adjudication, a legal process that establishes water rights, water right priorities and water quantities.

A few water basins have gone through adjudication of surface water rights, and Puglia said it's an expensive and long, drawn-out process. But it's relatively easy to start.

"I think we're going to see a lot of property owners who will seriously launch adjudication of their basin," he said.

Although Exeter-based California Citrus Mutual believes groundwater overdraft needs to be addressed, the hastily prepared bills are not the answer, said Laura Brown, director of governmental affairs.

“I think we’re especially concerned about how fast this legislation was absolutely rushed,” she said. “It didn’t go through the proper vetting in the committees, and they were spot bills that were amended later. Bills that at one point were four pages became 45 pages.

“It’s just a complex issue and for them to not have stakeholder input and input from experts and the water industry and natural resources is pretty horrifying.”

She said many citrus producers, especially on the east side of the San Joaquin Valley, have historically relied on surface water. But with those supplies in question, some have turned to groundwater to survive.

“We still have so many growers who rely on surface water, and we’re still unsure about what the future holds for surface water allocations,” she said. “Many growers have put in wells in places they have never had them before.”

Although the details of the legislation still need to be worked out, the citrus mutual’s Brown said the bills could affect many members’ livelihoods by limiting pumping or new wells.

The Sebastopol-based California Climate & Agriculture Network, on the other hand, praised the governor’s actions, saying the bills will benefit all groundwater users, including agriculture.

“I think the bills will provide certainty for agricultural producers by creating a system based at the local level of how best to manage groundwater,” said Jeanne Merrill, policy director.

A few groundwater basins already have management plans, but she said the legislation will provide more uniformity.

“I think these bills will create a level playing field by which all water users will have input on how to best manage groundwater in California,” Merrill said.

She said the legislation also will ensure that all residents have a right to groundwater and not just whoever installs the biggest pump.

Miles Reiter, CEO of Watsonville-based Driscoll’s was present as the governor signed the bills, supposed the legislation.

“At Driscoll’s, we are highly dependent on groundwater,” he said in a news release. “The future of agriculture in areas along the central coast hinges on sustainable management of this precious resource.”

He was unavailable for further comment.