

Creston Advisory Body



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April 23, 2013

San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors
County Government Center
San Luis Obispo, California 93408

RE: May 7th, SLO Board of Supervisors Meeting, Agenda Item #21, Paso Robles Groundwater Management Plan Implementation Update

Dear Supervisors,

The Creston Advisory Body (CAB) met on April 17, 2013 at the Creston Community Church for a regularly scheduled meeting. One of the most important topics of discussion was the Paso Robles Groundwater Basin (Basin). Creston residents are united in their concern over the looming water crisis. It is our understanding that the County has declared the PR Groundwater Basin is at a Severity Level III. A review of the latest PR Groundwater Basin Update (2012) presents the latest data indicating that the Basin is essentially in overdraft. After a very lively discussion on how the huge (59AF) Ag ponds along Creston Road that lie over the Basin got approved by the county, we then reviewed the four lists of "Solutions" put forth by the PR Groundwater Basin Blue Ribbon Solutions Sub-Committee. We first reviewed some statistics on the Basin: which subareas of the basin are most impacted; who are the main water pumpers; how much time do we have; and how the economy of the County might be impacted. Our major focus was on how the proposed solutions would benefit small local family owned growers and rural residents such as ourselves.

The following comments were delivered by CAB members and members of the public.

1. A majority of the solutions focus on the cities and leave rural residents out of the picture. Many of the solutions lack specificity and are hard to assess.
2. The solutions that propose bringing in supplemental water are far into the future, at least a decade away, are extremely expensive and do not include infrastructure to get water to rural residential homes and small vineyards such as those in Creston. Long term solutions need to remain on the table because with continued growth in the county we will need more water in the future. However, there are rural residential wells beginning to go dry now. One local water hauler delivered five loads of water in the month of December, something he has never had to do before.
3. There were questions regarding the County's authority to implement some of the proposed solutions. It was stated that the County has a responsibility to protect the "health & safety" of the public. Ensuring the availability of water is essential.
4. According to County water reports the Basin covers 505,000 acres. The three most impacted sub-areas of the Basin (Estrella, Creston & Shandon) cover close to half (216,000 acres) of the Basin and are made up primarily of rural residents and vineyards. The vineyards (29,000 acres) are consuming over 67% of the total pumped water but cover only 5% of the acreage over the Basin. There are 8000 more acres of large coporate vineyards being planted over the basin as we speak. The number of additional acres that could go into grapes is uncertain but known to be very large.
5. Using a method from the 2006 Todd report, calculations of the loss of AF storage in the basin show that we are losing over 5000 AF/year, before pumping by the new vineyard plantings are

taken into account. We are exceeding our annual Yield of 97,700 by more than 5000 AF/year. Increased pumping will make the overdraft even worse.

6. It was suggested that the cities could take more of the Naci water. However, responses included the comment that it isn't fair to put the financial burden for watering the vineyards on the people who live in the cities.
7. Many questions were posed about the potential economic impact as we considered the proposed solutions. What is the source of revenue to the county from vineyards and wineries other than property taxes? Are vineyard properties taxed higher? What about Williamson Act properties? Are there any other tax exemptions? If grapes are grown here but processed out of the county does the county collect any revenue such as sales taxes? How many local residents are employed in the wine industry? Would local workers lose jobs if vineyards were required to conserve water? Is there an economic benefit to the County to encourage the production of high quality rather than high tonnage grape crops?
8. Immediate steps must be taken to ensure water is available to residents and small vineyards in the short term and to allow the aquifer to be replenished. A management structure that ensures fair and equitable water allowances is essential to protect rural residents. Rural residents need to have a strong presence in any basin-wide management structure which determines how water is to be allocated over the Basin.

Our elected CAB representatives think that many of the questions posed at our meeting such as the County's authority in managing Basin pumping, and understanding the impact the vineyards/wineries are having on our local economy (revenues versus gross pumping) are extremely important and need to be answered. The answers need to be made available to the public.

The CAB representatives voted unanimously to recommend that the County implement steps immediately, such as implementing appropriate "Urgent Moratoriums" and establishing a basin-wide management structure, to stem the run away increase in pumping from the basin. Management of the basin can protect everyone's water rights and keep our local economy safe.

Sincerely,
Sheila Lyons
CAB Chairperson

Cc: Courtney Howard, Water Resources Engineer, SLO County Public Works Department
Larry Werner, Chairperson PR Groundwater Basin Management Blue Ribbon Committee