



CAFF
COMMUNITY ALLIANCE
with **FAMILY FARMERS**

THE FARMER'S GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING GROUNDWATER MANAGEMENT IN THE PASO ROBLES BASIN

July 2026

Photograph by Jesse Trace of Ambyth Winery



What is SGMA?

The Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) is California's first effort to regulate groundwater. Groundwater is water stored in underground aquifers, pumped via wells. Depending on the snow and rain available for surface water (lakes, streams, or reservoirs), groundwater accounts for 40-60% of our total annual water usage in California. During periods of drought, California especially depends on groundwater for its water supply.

Groundwater and surface water are interconnected but are regulated separately.

Surface water has been regulated by the state since 1914, but not groundwater. In 2014, California was in a multi-year drought. As wells went dry and portions of ground started to sink, it became clear that in many parts of the state, groundwater was being used faster than it could be replenished. In response, SGMA was passed to ensure sustainable groundwater usage. Each region that has been identified as "high" or "medium" priority must implement a regionally specific Groundwater Sustainability Plan (GSP). The Paso Robles Groundwater Basin (PRGWB) is considered a high priority basin.



↑ Pigs . Photo by Beewench Farm.

So, what does this mean for my farm or ranch?

If your farm or ranch is located within the PRGWB, you will have to pay for groundwater pumping this fall, 2026. Groundwater access for small farms and rural domestic pumpers is in jeopardy because of declining basin storage. Currently, there is no direct assistance in SLO County for dry wells, though

Blaine Reely (breely@co.slo.ca.us), the SLO County Director of Groundwater Sustainability, is working with local groundwater agencies to address these issues by late 2026.



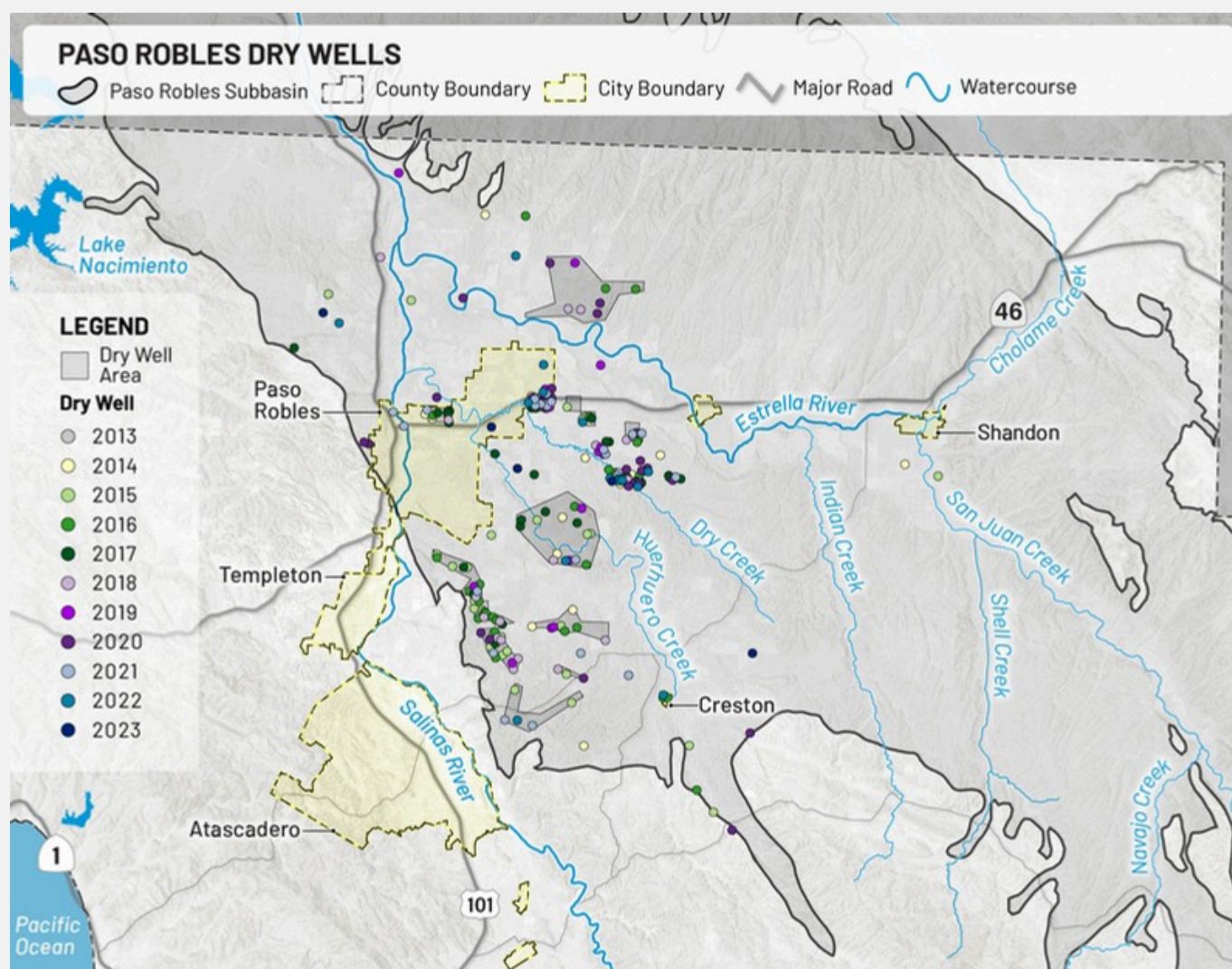
↑ Irrigated Wine Grapes . Photo by High Camp Wines.

What wells have gone dry?

If you or someone you know has a dry well, report it to the State Dry Well Reporting System (mydrywell.water.ca.gov) and the SLO County Health department

A dry well report commissioned by the SLO County Department of Groundwater Sustainability in 2022 shows that 236 wells have been reported dry since 2013 in the PRGWB. For a detailed look at the recent SLO County reported dry wells, see *Figure 1*. The analysis concluded that the number of dry well occurrences in the Basin is expected to increase due to continued declining groundwater levels in areas containing domestic well clusters.

According to the 2023 Groundwater Sustainability Plan (GSP), three of the 22 Paso Robles Formation Aquifer wells in the monitoring network exhibited exceedances, even during high precipitation years. Some of these wells have lowered for several years in a row and demonstrate a chronic decline in the groundwater elevation. For information on private well management visit the SLO County private well owner resource page (<https://tinyurl.com/bdepjmnn>).



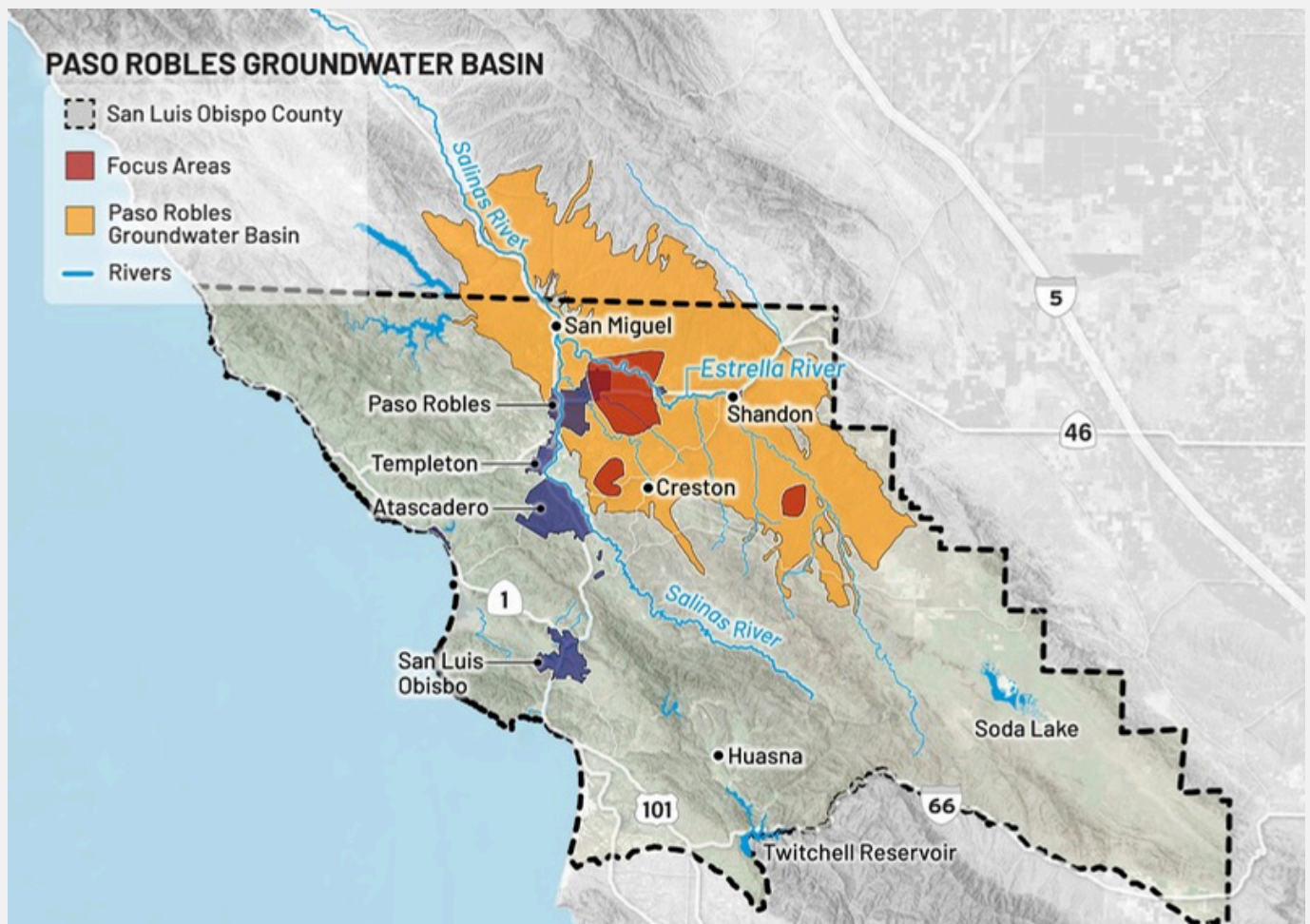
↑ Figure 1: Reported Dry wells 2018-2022. Illustration by Dudek

How does SLO county handle modifying wells and drilling new ones in the PRGWB?

All drilling and modifying of groundwater wells must be permitted (<https://tinyurl.com/22wmd5jw>) through the SLO County Environmental Health Department. Small domestic users can have the permit fee waived using the Fee Waiver Replacement Well Requirements & Well Owner Sign Off Form (<https://tinyurl.com/42u33tt7>). The cost to re-drill a well in the PRGWB is approximately \$80,000 for 500-800 ft depending on local environmental factors.

Wells that overlie the PRGWB are subject to rules that were first developed in 2013 to protect the groundwater resource. The program ended in 2022 but was reinstated from 2023 until Jan 1,

2028. According to the New or Expanded Crop Production Code, landowners must apply for an agricultural offset clearance (<https://tinyurl.com/4h2kv6yk>) in order to develop commercially irrigated agriculture. There are several potential exemptions, for example, some parcels may have a 5 acre-foot/year site exemption if not located in areas called Focus Areas where severe groundwater decline has taken place (Figure 2). If the property is not exempt, you must apply for an ag offset clearance or (zoning clearance) which costs \$540.



↑ Figure 2: Paso Robles Groundwater Subbasin showing the Focus Areas of severe groundwater decline. Illustration by Dudek

How does SGMA work in the PRGWB in SLO County?

In SLO County, planning and implementing groundwater management activities are the responsibility of the 5 PRGWB Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSAs): County of SLO GSA, El Pomar Creston GSA, Shandon San Juan GSA, City of Paso Robles GSA, and the San Miguel GSA.



↑ Hambly Lavender Farm in San Miguel. Photo by Jennifer Silvera.

Paso Robles, Creston, Shandon, and parts of Templeton and San Miguel, all overlie the PRGWB. If you aren't sure, this GSA Map Viewer (<https://tinyurl.com/5ajxwpwn>) can help you identify your GSA and your location in the subbasin.

The GSAs originally collaborated through the Paso Basin Cooperative Committee (PBCC), but did not have regulatory power. GSP regulations require a water budget for the basin to determine a sustainable yield based on input, storage and extraction. The GSAs have a network of groundwater monitoring wells and

satellite evapotranspiration measurements to measure basin levels and extraction and are tasked with reaching sustainability by 2040. The PBCC changed from a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) to a Joint Powers Authority (JPA). The San Miguel GSA did not join the JPA. This new entity is called the Paso Robles Area Groundwater Authority (PRAGA). In contrast to its past advisory form, it has the authority to allocate groundwater pumping, space wells, and levy assessments on landowners or pumpers, among other actions.

The approach of SGMA is to maintain local control over groundwater decisions. The Department of Water Resources (DWR) reviews the plans created by PRAGA. The State Water Resources Control Board acts as a backstop, stepping in to take control if local agencies don't make progress on their groundwater sustainability goals. Basins that are not meeting goals are placed under probation. Probationary basins are currently being charged \$300 per well and \$20 per acre foot, in addition to locally imposed fees. All wells are required to be metered.

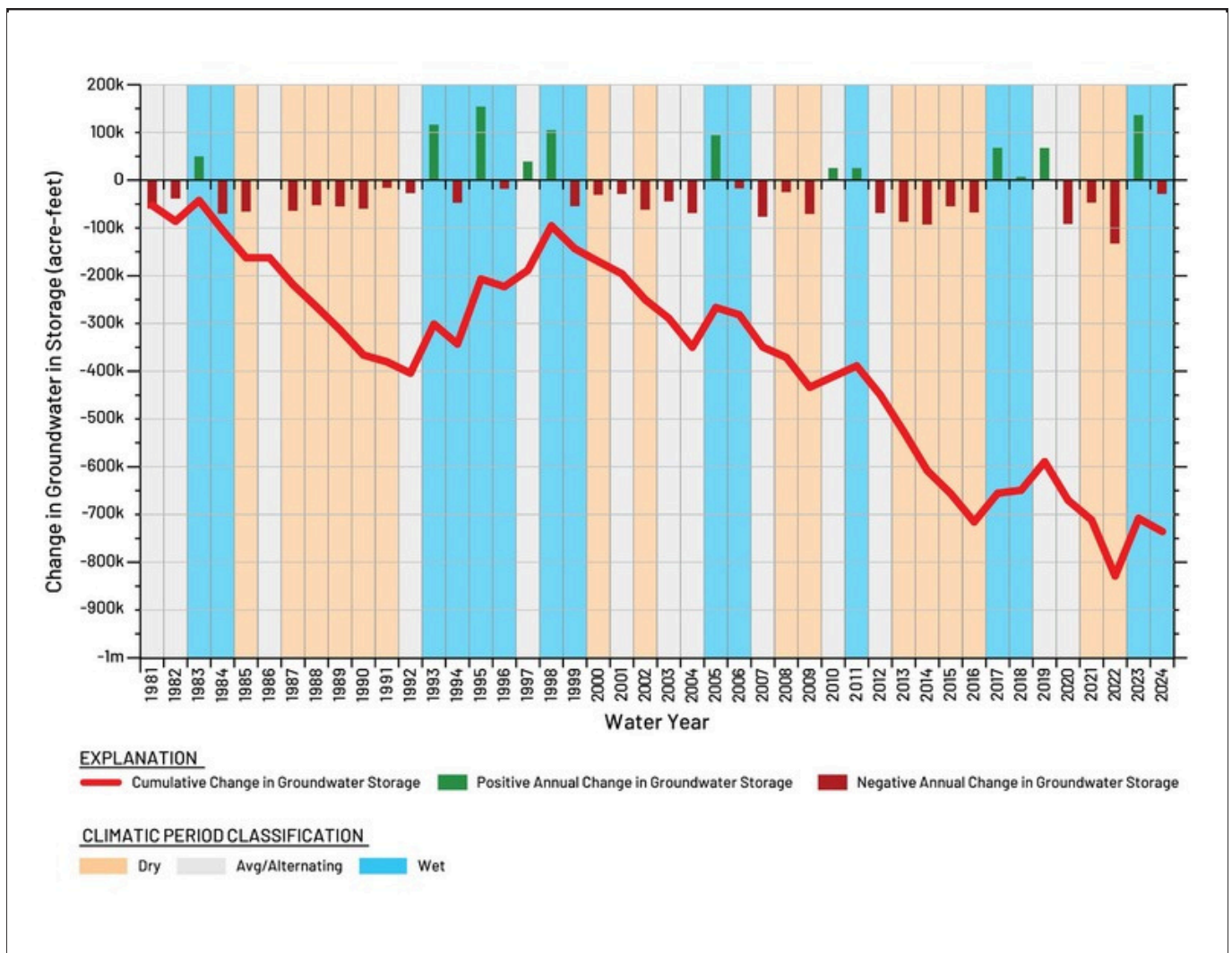
Groundwater Quantity and Quality Issues in Paso Robles

Sustainable groundwater use according to the California DWR is defined by six indicators: groundwater storage and levels (quantity), groundwater quality, land subsidence, saltwater intrusion, and interconnected surface water. For this summary of the PRGWB, we will focus on quantity and quality, the two main issues affecting small farmers in the region.

Groundwater Quantity

Since PRAGA does not currently meter or allocate how much water each person can use, they set “minimum thresholds,” which are levels the aquifer must stay above to maintain sustainability. It’s a way to define how low the aquifer can go before serious problems emerge, called “undesirable results.” If the water level drops below these thresholds, more severe action would need to be taken. These thresholds vary around the basin due to the complexity of the aquifer but are on average 90 to 285 ft below ground level.

The Sustainable Yield of the basin through 2040 is estimated at approximately 61,100 acre-feet per year, although this is higher than previous estimates. However, current trends of groundwater use are unsustainable and demonstrate a chronic decline in storage and level ([Figure 3](#)). The average annual overdraft is 14,000 AF. Declining water tables below established minimum thresholds in specific areas, as indicated by monitoring wells, will trigger investigations and may lead to local or basin-wide limits on pumping.



↑ Figure 3: Estimated Annual Cumulative Change in Groundwater Storage in the PRGWB.
Illustration by Dudek and GSI Environmental, Inc.

Groundwater Quality

Disrupting aquifers through overdraft can cause the migration of contaminant plumes, agitate deep saline aquifers and change chemical constituents of the water, rendering it toxic or problematic. Water quality indicators are based on local, state, and federal water quality measurements. The thresholds are set at the maximum contaminant level (MCL) defined by the Regional Water Quality Control Board or based on amounts that can reduce crop production.

Several problematic substances known as constituents of concern (COC) —salinity (as indicated by electrical conductivity), Total Dissolved Solids (TDS), sodium, chloride, nitrate, sulfate, boron, and gross alpha radiation—are being monitored. Currently COC levels have remained steady according to the GSAs' monitoring efforts.

What does PRAGA have planned for the basin?

The Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program (MILR) will provide a pathway to reduce groundwater pumping in the PRGWB through voluntary repurposing of irrigated land to other less water-intensive uses. The program has created a fallowed land registry (<https://tinyurl.com/y6he52bm>) that allows pumpers to register their agricultural parcels and temporarily stop irrigating. This process allows exemption for property owners that are in the Williamson Act while remaining compliant with the Agricultural Pumping Offset Ordinance.

The Shandon San Juan (SSJ) GSA is seeking water rights to Nacimiento and Salinas Reservoir flood flows for groundwater recharge.

The PRAGA board attempted a Proposition (Prop) 218 assessment in the summer of 2025 to levy fees on groundwater pumpers and use the funds to develop infrastructure for basin management. This process allows for protest by the people that will be taxed. The measure failed with 57% of the users rejecting its creation. A fee study was completed for groundwater extraction costs for Prop 218.

Because of the failure of the measure, the PRAGA board developed a Prop 26 based fee which lasts for one year and can be passed by a majority of the board of directors. The Proposition passed in late Spring 2026. The fee results are summarized in [Table 1](#). These fees will be levied on the county property tax role in Fall 2026 and are based on the prior year's water use.

The network of Regional Monitoring Site (RMS) wells is undergoing modification and expansion from 23 to roughly 75 wells. This will greatly improve the understanding of the aquifer in different parts of the basin.

↓ Table 1: Results from the PRAGA fee study per acre foot per fiscal year

Extractor Category	FY 26-27
Rural De-minimis (Per AF)	Exempt
Public Water System / Commercial (Per AF)	\$22.90
Agriculture (Per AF)	\$22.90

Market forces cause significant water demand fluctuations

Agricultural water use constituted 91% of the groundwater use in the subbasin in water year 2025. Land cover and land use change for thirsty perennial vineyards are the greatest user of groundwater in the basin. Total vineyard acreage in the basin rose from about 6,000 acres in 1985 to roughly 40,000 acres as of 2022. However, current market trends have caused many large scale vineyards to fallow or remove thousands of acres of winegrapes in 2025 and 2026.



↑ Tablas Creek Vineyard Weed Abatement.
Photo by Jesse Trace.

How do I get more information?



Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) is partnering with UC ANR Small Farms Network in this work, funded by the Department of Water Resources Underrepresented Communities, California Tribes, and Small Farmers Groundwater Technical Assistance Program. CAFF can connect small farmers with free legal advice through the UC Davis Small Farmers Water Justice Legal Clinic, and technical assistance like well sounding or water testing through Dudek Consulting. Contact us to find out more about these services!

Jesse Trace, Community Groundwater Organizer, Jesse@caff.org (805) 994-9862

Attend the regular Paso Robles Area Groundwater Authority public meetings, join the mailing list (<https://tinyurl.com/mryrv96n>), or contact Taylor Blakslee, the project manager, via email or phone. TBlakslee@hgcpm.com, (661) 477-3385



Jane Gray, jgray@dudek.com, (805) 308-8531



California Department of Water Resources (DWR) Underrepresented Communities, California Tribes, and Small Farmers Groundwater Technical Assistance (URCTA) Program
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This outreach document provides basin or subbasin specific information and identifies local groundwater management actions that may affect small scale farmers in these areas. This document does not reflect official positions or regulatory standards applied or used by the Department when administering its function under SGMA.