

Groundwater Management and Drought: An Interview with the San Joaquin Valley Partnership

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As California continues to experience historic drought conditions with less available snowpack and precipitation, groundwater basins are being more heavily relied on for water supply needs throughout the state. Groundwater serves as a critical resource for many different industries and uses, including farms, urban and rural communities, and ecosystems in California. This increased reliance on groundwater over the past several decades has resulted in the lowering of groundwater levels in some areas, more wells being installed, and the deepening of wells to reach available groundwater during extended dry periods.

Managing and protecting groundwater is especially important as over 80% of Californians depend on groundwater for some portion of their water supply and some communities rely entirely on groundwater for drinking water. When groundwater levels decline, impacts such as increased dry wells can occur, leaving some communities and households vulnerable.

The Department of Water Resources (DWR) is committed to working collaboratively with partners to provide [data and tools](#) and proactively address drought impacts on drinking water wells, as documented in the state's [Groundwater Management and Drinking Water Well Principles and Strategies](#) framework. DWR has maintained a [dry well reporting system](#) since the last drought period from 2012-2016 in which several thousand dry well reports were received. DWR is assisting local counties and groundwater managers and working with partner organizations to prepare for and respond to drought-related water shortages.

DWR Sustainable Groundwater Management Office representatives, Steven Springhorn and Melissa Sparks-Kranz, recently interviewed three women in leadership positions, advancing drought-related actions in the San Joaquin Valley: Laura Ramos, Associate Director for Research and Development at the California Water Institute, Lacey McBride, Water Resources Manager for Merced County and Tami McVay, Program Director-Partner Services at Self-Help Enterprises.

INTERVIEW:

What is the San Joaquin Valley Partnership and what is your role in the Partnership?

LAURA RAMOS: The California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley (Partnership) is a public-private partnership sharply focused on improving the region's economic vitality and quality of life for more than four million San Joaquin Valley residents.

The Partnership is addressing the challenges of the region through seven Strategic Priorities and 10 Work Groups that are helping the Valley emerge as California's 21st Century Opportunity. Workgroups include: Air Quality, Advanced Communications Services (Broadband, Telemedicine, AgTech and Digital Inclusion), Economic Development, Energy, Health, Higher Education, San Joaquin Valley Housing Collaborative, Pre K-12 Education, Sustainable Communities, and Water.

The California Water Institute facilitates and coordinates the Water Work Group, which has been focusing on creating a unified message and outreach plan to San Joaquin Valley residents whose domestic wells have gone dry and need drinking water resources.

How are the local entities working together, and with the State, to proactively address drought challenges?

LAURA RAMOS: The Water Work Group is a collaboration of representatives from all eight San Joaquin Valley counties, the State Water Resources Control Board, DWR, state and local offices of emergency services, and Groundwater Sustainability Agencies.

Since last summer, an average of 25 individuals from each of these local entities has been working together to develop a unified message and a list of resources by county to create a one-stop website for San Joaquin Valley residents who are looking for drinking water resources. Now that the message and marketing materials have been created, the participating entities are working together to get the message out and reach all residents in the Valley about the resources available.

LACEY MCBRIDE: Throughout the development of the outreach and messaging on drinking water, the Water Work Group also recognized the need to identify some best practices for emergency domestic well permitting and common data sharing needs seen throughout the San Joaquin Valley region. The Work Group has broadened their discussions to focus on these data sharing needs going forward as well.

What are the primary drought challenges the Partnership is helping to address?

LAURA RAMOS: The primary drought challenge that the Partnership's Water Work Group is trying to address is the lowering of groundwater levels that is affecting domestic well owners. As well owners lose access to their primary source of drinking water and are not able to afford or obtain services due to drilling backlogs or financial challenges, the Work Group intends to let them know that, in the meantime, there are resources available to help get them emergency drinking water.

What resources are available for well owners during times of drought?

TAMI MCVAY: During these drought challenging times, Self-Help Enterprises, through funding provided by the State Water Resources Control Board, can provide resources such as water tanks, bottled water and/or financial resources to qualifying private domestic well owners. Flyers and social media graphics were created in nine different languages and are available to anyone that would like to help share the message of the availability of these critical resources.

What lessons would you share with others to anticipate and adapt to additional changes in climate, such as more frequent and prolonged drought?

LACEY MCBRIDE: We have learned during the development and continued efforts of the Water Work Group that many local entities are able to come together, identify available resources and distribute a message broadly. Clear and frequent communication among those impacted by drought allows entities to work together to quickly address challenges as they arise. When communicating about available resources, it is important to have a unified message so that everyone is telling the same story. In order to do that, a single agency must facilitate and coordinate the effort.

LAURA RAMOS: The Water Work Group's focus is to have a coordinated message among all of the Work Group members, but they each have their own outreach plans and we are okay with people receiving the message from multiple places or multiple times. The message should target those with private domestic wells, as well as anyone that might know of someone with a domestic well.

An example of these efforts took place in real life – My mom's well went dry a few months ago. I found out by chance as my mom mentioned the issue to my sisters that live in a community supplied by municipal water who weren't familiar with available domestic well resources. Once I found out, I completed the Self-Help Enterprises form to request services. A week later, a water tank was delivered to the home. My mom went from two months of struggling with challenges to her household water supply, to having water in one week.

Let's share the message to everyone!!

CLOSING:

Coordination efforts such as the San Joaquin Valley Partnership's work supports communities to prepare for and address the real challenges of drought for individual households that rely on wells for drinking water. Listed below are more drought assistance

resources. If you or someone you know is in need of drought assistance or has household water supply challenges, please contact your local county's emergency contact.

San Joaquin Valley Partnership Resources:

- Resources webpage: www.Mywellwentdry.com
- Outreach materials (multiple languages available).

State Drought Assistance:

- State of California Drought Webpage: <https://drought.ca.gov/drought-assistance/>
- Report Dry Household Wells (in English and Spanish): <https://mydrywell.water.ca.gov/report/>