



SENATE BILL 552

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What is SB 552 and what does it mean to you?

Senate Bill 552 (SB 552) of 2021 aimed to address critical gaps necessary for enhancing drought resilience in California's small and rural communities. These communities are often disproportionately affected during dry periods, lacking guidance for water shortage planning and drought response. As a result, households face water scarcity, relying heavily on hauled water, while state agencies grapple with understanding the extent of drought impacts. The California Legislature passed SB 552 with goals to 1) better understand future risks of drought on small water systems and private domestic well users and 2) support planning for addressing future risks. To achieve these goals, the law creates new requirements for counties and small water systems.

Counties must establish a standing drought task force focusing on domestic wells and state small systems and develop a drought resilience plan for these groups.

Small water suppliers have various new requirements, some of which depend on their number of connections. Larger small systems (>1,000 connections) and school systems must develop a water shortage contingency plan ([link to templates](#)). Systems with fewer than 1,000 connections instead must add a drought element to their emergency notification plan. All small water suppliers are now required to submit water use and supply data to the State Water Resources Control Board and implement a set of shortage mitigation measures if they are financially feasible. These measures include requiring customer metering, having groundwater well monitoring systems in place, securing at least one secondary source of water, installing backup generators, and meeting flow requirements to support firefighting, each on its own deadline.

While the Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience (SAFER) Needs Assessment now incorporates tracking of these small water system requirements as part of

its assessment, the overall State Board's SAFER Program for assistance is distinct from this set of SB 552 requirements.

Points of coordination between Counties and GSAs

The implementation of SB 552 creates an opportunity to usher in a new era of collaboration between Counties and Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSAs). This legislation has become a catalyst for joint efforts in several key areas, as summarized below, and has transformed the landscape of groundwater coordination and fostered a transparent and cohesive approach to water management.

1. **Domestic Well Inventories:** SB 552 has empowered Counties to take the lead in compiling and maintaining data on domestic wells within their jurisdiction. This inventory forms the bedrock of informed decision-making for GSAs, creating a shared understanding of local groundwater usage dynamics. The ongoing collaboration ensures the accuracy of this inventory, providing a solid foundation for effective groundwater management strategies.
2. **Data Collection and Sharing:** The collection of groundwater-level data and monitoring coordination is another area of shared interest. For example, GSAs have to relate groundwater elevations to undesirable results for domestic well owners. Counties that often issue well permits and now have obligations for action when wells go dry have a strong vested interest in reviewing data from representative monitoring points to catch alarming trends and react to them. Likewise, counties may have other monitoring data that could be a useful addition to GSA monitoring programs, such as detailed well permitting data collection or biotic or water quality monitoring results. Through coordinated monitoring efforts, a more comprehensive understanding of groundwater dynamics emerges, enabling both entities to make decisions that align with the broader goal of sustainability.



3. **Stakeholder Outreach:** SB 552 has paved the way for unified outreach efforts, ensuring consistent messaging to stakeholders. Counties and GSAs, recognizing the importance of public awareness, can align their communication strategies to convey a unified message. This concerted effort aims to inform the public, agricultural stakeholders, and other interested parties about the shared vision for sustainable groundwater practices and services available when needed. Clear messaging and transparency can help build trust between the community, the GSA, and the County.
4. **Collaborative Win-Win Solutions:** The legislation further promotes collaboration by encouraging the identification of common solutions to mitigate risks for GSA projects/ actions and County Domestic Well Mitigation plans. Shared challenges, such as overdraft and contamination threats, should be met with collaborative strategies. When counties and GSAs pool resources, expertise, and solutions, they can enhance the overall effectiveness of groundwater management practices for the benefit of all stakeholders involved.

In essence, SB 552 has opened avenues for robust collaboration between Counties and GSAs, emphasizing the importance of working together at the local level for sustainable groundwater management, which is a key tenet of SGMA. This collaborative approach not only complies with SB 552 but also positions Counties and GSAs as key players in securing the long-term vitality of groundwater resources.

Challenges & opportunities

While the collaborative efforts described above will better position Counties and GSAs in assessing risks and planning mitigation strategies for vulnerable domestic wells and small community water systems, several challenges and uncertainties will require careful consideration and ongoing close coordination during the development and implementation of drought resilience plans:

- Overlapping authorities and a lack of clarity on who is ultimately responsible for mitigating failed wells due to drought conditions can hinder or delay emergency mitigation and assistance efforts. Establishing clear roles and responsibilities for these scenarios will be necessary at the local level to facilitate effective response and assistance between Counties and GSAs during future droughts.
- While short-term mitigation strategies, such as water hauling or providing bottled water, can provide critical relief during well-failure events. Long-term technical solutions can be limited in areas containing marginal or poor-yielding aquifer systems, existing overdraft, or water quality impairments. In such circumstances, consolidation of existing water systems and domestic wells, which can be costly and complex, may be the only viable solution. Additionally, modifications to County well ordinances may be needed to establish or strengthen requirements to assess these risks prior to issuing new well permits to proactively avoid new future problems. For example, the County of Santa Cruz is currently updating its well ordinance to require stronger well yield testing in areas of known water supply challenges.
- Effective and consistent outreach to rural domestic well owners and small water systems can be challenging given the wide variety of geographic areas, water resource conditions, and supply sources. In Sonoma County, countywide implementation of SB552 includes focused outreach and data collection at a Supervisorial District scale to capture some of these unique differences and support proactive and targeted mitigation planning.
- The lack of resources among GSAs, Counties, State Small Water Systems, and many domestic well owners further hinders the ability to respond swiftly to urgent water shortages. Coordinated action and resource allocation, including ongoing state funding opportunities, are urgently needed to ensure the resilience of domestic wells and small water systems during drought events.

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