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88th KZGN News Talking Points Editorial
By: Tom Wiknich

Warning: you need to know what is going on with the new state mandated groundwater sustainability agency

As we reported in yesterday’s regular news segment, today I’ll discuss the new state mandated groundwater sustainability agency. Last Friday evening, there was a special meeting here in Ridgecrest from the state water board about the startup of the groundwater sustainability agency. David Gutierrez and Tim Ross spoke from the California Department of Water Resources. The meeting was attended by more than 100 people. The DWR representative gave a presentation of the ‘how’ and ‘why’ the state passed legislation to start these GSAs. The GSAs are to be established by 2017 for critical water areas. The Indian Wells Valley is in a critical water zone. The law requires the new GSA to enact and implement a plan by 2020 to stop and correct the overdraft that is happening in the valley. While the meeting was good, it was too short. By the time the speakers got done providing their presentations, there was only about 40 minutes left for public input and questions. The facilitator only allowed two questions per person—very inadequate for a matter this important. Here is the warning to everyone: In case you don’t know it yet, this new GSA will have authority to enact water restrictions, to install water meters on every well in the valley, to establish fees to charge everyone in the valley to pay for their agency and implement the correction plan. Don’t think that if you’re on your own well, or already a customer if the water district, that this GSA won’t affect you? I guarantee every resident in the valley will be affected by the plan. Questions from the public included questions on how will the people that serve on the board be selected? The main concern is whether these people will be elected or appointed? Right now there are about 5 agencies that will have a voting seat on the new agency set by the legislation. The legislation states any agency that has authority over water and land use in the basin area, is to have a voting seat on the GSA.

That would include, the city of Ridgecrest, Kern County, IWVWD, Inyo County, and San Bernardino County. The board could include other non-voting members if it decided to.

These non-voting members could include the Navy, BLM, and Searles Valley Water District.

Public comment showed the public is advocating for an elected board……not appointed. If they were appointed by say the county supervisors, they would not be answerable to the people here, especially considering that we only elect one seat on the county board. This will be a board that will have a lot of authority over our water costs and uses. We need to have people on the board elected by the people of the Indian Wells Valley. Will they have taxing authority? Not exactly. It’s a play on words. They will have “fee” authority. While most people don’t see any difference, they are set under certain rules. But nevertheless, there will be fees coming. I guarantee that. What will it cost to run this new agency? No one knows yet, but rest assured that there will probably be a manager, secretary, attorney, maybe contractor support, facilities, etc. It won’t be cheap. Who will have to pay for it? The DWR rep stated that there was some money available from the state to startup these new GSAs. I would bet that the cost to run them will be shifted from the state to us. Who will have to pay for it? One big question I posed at the meeting was, where will this new agency be based? As far as many are concerned, if this agency’s purpose is to provide management of the water basin in the Indian Wells Valley, the agency better be based in the Indian Wells Valley. Not in some distant location like Bakersfield or Sacramento. I believe I heard Mick Gleason say the board doesn’t have to be based here. I don’t like the sound of that. Even if the legislation doesn’t require the new GSA to be based here, the right thing to do is to base it here. This board must be easily accessible to the people it will have authority over. Housing them in city hall would be beneficial, and there is plenty of room for them in that building. Next to these representatives being elected, instead of appointed by people that do not answer to us here, we need the agency to be based here, as well. The decisions they make can change the way we use our lands, and what we pay for water. Since the agency’s authority comes from the state will they have the authority to mandate to other elected bodies, such as the city of Ridgecrest, the water district, and maybe over the county? I don’t know the answer to that question.

Now I get to the real crux of this editorial, and my concern. Right now there is a small group meeting to start this GSA. I’ve been told some of the meetings have been held behind closed doors over in Bakersfield. Yet, this group of speakers emphasized that transparency of setting up this new agency in important. To that I say, stop having the meetings in Bakersfield. Have them here. Notify the people of these meetings. Open them up to the people for comment. It was stated by Mick Gleason that the county was going to submit papers to establish this new agency. He also stated that any group of people could gather to do file to form the agency as well. Then the state would decide which group to approve. Generally, it seems Mick’s group is doing ok. However, if they don’t decide to have elected people on the board, and to base the agency here, then I believe another group of people will need to get together and form a more responsive board. Enough of the meetings behind closed doors, and over in Bakersfield. Open the meetings up to us.

Transparency is very important. There is so much potential impact to us, that this is going to be a very important subject in the very near future. This is a major issue coming down the tracks like a freight train. So stand by for more information. Be prepared to get involved.

In conclusion, face it, we will have this new GSA, and it will have authority over us, potentially affecting our lives. This board needs to be elected by people in the Indian Wells Valley, and be based here in the valley. Stop the closed door meetings. If you agree, make sure you let supervisor Gleason know.

I’m Tom Wiknich, and that’s what I think. I’d like to know what you think. If you have any comments about this editorial, or would like to discuss or recommend a topic, I’d like to hear from you. Please email them to info@kzgn.net.