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Viewpoints: Groundwater legislation marks turning point to achieve reliable water supply

Highlights -----

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By Timothy Quinn and Lester Snow - Special to The Bee

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Developing this new statewide policy did not come about easily, but that's often the case when tackling tough problems. Brown, Sen. Fran Pavley and Assemblyman Roger Dickinson led a bipartisan, collaborative effort to pass real and meaningful groundwater reforms with numerous stakeholder meetings dating back to January. As a result of their commitment, and the participation of water districts, businesses, farmers and conservationists in the process, California no longer carries the dubious distinction of being the only state in the West without statewide standards and requirements in place for managing groundwater.

Despite the public hearings and meetings, there is a lot of misinformation about the new law and speculation about what implementation might look like. A central feature of these bills, and the reason we supported them, is that they are based on local agency control and flexibility. Even the governor's signing message noted "a central feature of these bills is the recognition that groundwater management in California is best accomplished locally."

We couldn't agree more.

The legislation clearly gives local agencies the authority and tools to assess the conditions of their local water basins and take the necessary steps to balance them. Specifically, local agencies have two years to create local groundwater sustainability agencies and five to seven years after that to complete groundwater sustainability plans. Once in place, they have 20 years to fully implement them. The legislation also includes numerous provisions to protect water and property rights. Specifically, it does not affect existing surface water or groundwater rights.

It is also important for water managers and farmers struggling with the drought and deep cuts in surface water deliveries to keep in mind that this groundwater legislation is just one essential component of the California Water Action Plan put forth by the Brown administration this year.

Proposition 1, the water bond, will provide \$100 million for implementation of sustainable groundwater management plans if passed. The legislation, which was a necessary complement to the water bond, will empower local agencies to manage groundwater basins in a sustainable manner for the long haul. It will not have an impact on current emergency measures in place to respond to this drought. We can ensure a reliable water supply for California, but only when we combine the water bond and groundwater sustainability with conservation, water recycling, expanded storage, safe drinking water, wetlands and watershed restoration.

The state's third year of drought focused everyone's attention on the magnitude of our water problems and created the momentum for action during this year's legislative session. But overlooked by many – the media included – were the months of stakeholder meetings, public hearings and negotiations on how best to address California's groundwater crisis, which brought us to the historic moment where Brown signed the legislation.

With the signing behind us, we look forward to working with agricultural and other diverse interests to ensure the law is implemented successfully. The real work begins now as local agencies start to form groundwater sustainability agencies, use new tools to further investigate their groundwater basins and create their groundwater sustainability plans.

We are committed to successful implementation. We believe that in the near future we will look back on this time as a turning point in securing reliable, long-term water supplies for California's vital agricultural economy.

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