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**Sonoma County is Wrestling with State Groundwater Well Permitting Requirements in the Face of Growing Impacts on Existing Water Supplies, Public Health and the Environment**

Sonoma County faces a perfect storm of water management challenges during the drought, with implications across the West

**Santa Rosa, California** – Today, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors delayed consideration of a draft ordinance to begin addressing state requirements for permitting new groundwater wells. The County is facing a perfect storm of water management challenges related to groundwater pumping during the drought, including existing wells going dry and impacts on flows in the Russian River and its tributaries. Those reduced flows already limit local water supplies from the river. Low flows are also linked to the growth of harmful algae blooms, increasing threats to endangered fish and damage to the local tourism economy. Yet in a continuation of California’s long history of ineffective groundwater management, the county has issued hundreds of new well permits over the past several years.

“When it comes to managing water during the drought, Sonoma County faces a perfect storm,” according to Sean Bothwell, executive director of the California Coastkeeper Alliance. “Permitting new wells in the Russian River watershed undermines the reliability of water supplies for county residents, threatens public health and harms the environment. We urge the county to pause permitting new wells until they fully understand the damage they could cause and adopt measures to protect local waters. We stand ready to work with the county. Sonoma County is among the first California regions to face such an urgent groundwater management challenge. In the Colorado River Basin declining reservoir storage is providing the wake-up call for water managers. In much of California, that call comes from declining groundwater.”

“Issuing permits for new wells threatens the reliability of water for existing users, runs the risk of worsening harmful algae blooms that can kill pets and sicken children, and harms endangered coho salmon and steelhead,” said Don McEnhill, executive director of the Russian Riverkeeper. “New wells can deepen the hole the County must dig out of to comply with the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act. We’re encouraged that the County is moving quickly and hope they will strengthen the draft ordinance to protect all county residents and our precious environment.”

As a result of excessive pumping from existing wells, groundwater in the Santa Rosa Plan in the Russian River watershed is significantly overdrafted. The Santa Rosa Plain is recognized as a medium priority basin under the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act. The County and other agencies have

prepared a Groundwater Sustainability Plain to bring local groundwater use into balance. The County is confronting a challenge facing many California communities after a century and a half of growth without effective groundwater management. Today, climate change and drought are forcing this issue.

In the fifteen months ending in July of this year, the County issued permits for 303 new wells. 80 of those wells are in the overdrafted Santa Rosa Plain. Because groundwater pumping affects Russian River flows, the Public Trust Doctrine requires the County to regulate wells to preserve natural resources. In June of 2021, California Coastkeeper filed suit against Sonoma County in Sonoma County Superior Court to enforce this requirement. In addition, a March 28, 2022 [executive order by Governor Newsom](#) prohibits the County from issuing new well permits without first obtaining written verification from the local Groundwater Sustainability Agency that pumping from proposed wells will not be inconsistent with the basin's Groundwater Sustainability Plan. The County has permitted at least 14 new wells in the Santa Rosa Plain, including agricultural wells, without obtaining this required verification.

Even without additional groundwater wells, excessive pumping is linked to a range of serious impacts. Additional wells could worsen these problems, including:

- As a result of plummeting reservoir levels during a severe drought, [state regulators have ordered](#) more than 900 local water users to stop diversions from the Russian River. Additional groundwater wells can pump more water from the river, further reducing river flows and supplies for existing water users.
- Some local groundwater wells are running dry as a result of chronic overpumping and the drought. More groundwater wells can worsen this threat to existing users.
- Low flows threaten the survival of the Russian River's threatened steelhead and endangered coho salmon populations. The Russian River is critical to the survival of the coho, which is endangered along the entire California coast. Last year, [fewer than a hundred](#) adult coho were observed in the river, compared with a National Marine Fisheries Service goal of 10,000.
- On August 5, the North Coast Regional Water Board issued a [notice](#) urging caution as a result of growing toxic algae – also known as cyanobacteria - in the Russian River. The notice states that these algae blooms “are a threat to human health, especially children and can be fatal to dogs playing in the water.” Low flows, which raise water temperatures, are linked with these dangerous algae blooms.
- Low river flows and rising harmful algae blooms threaten the Russian River tourism industry that attracts almost a million visitors a year – generating hundreds of millions of dollars annually.

Today, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors discussed a draft groundwater ordinance and directed staff to undertake additional analysis and return with revisions before adoption. NGOs are eager to collaborate with the County to revise the ordinance and craft a permitting program that truly protects local waters and meets legal requirements.

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