
THIRD READING

Bill No: AB 293
Author: Bennett (D)
Introduced: 1/22/25
Vote: 21

SENATE NATURAL RES. & WATER COMMITTEE: 5-0, 6/10/25
AYES: Limón, Allen, Hurtado, Laird, Stern
NO VOTE RECORDED: Seyarto, Grove

ASSEMBLY FLOOR: 62-5, 4/1/25 - See last page for vote

SUBJECT: Groundwater sustainability agency: transparency

SOURCE: Author

DIGEST: This bill requires groundwater sustainability agencies (GSAs), by January 1, 2026, to publish information regarding their board membership and their board members' and executives' economic interests on its internet website or its local agency's internet website.

ANALYSIS:

Existing law:

- 1) Under the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA),
 - a) Requires high- or medium-priority basins that are subject to critical conditions of overdraft to be managed by a groundwater sustainability plan (GSP) or coordinated GSPs by January 31, 2020, and requires all other high- or medium-priority basins to be managed under a GSP or coordinated GSPs by January 31, 2022. (Water Code (WAT.) §10720.7(a)).
 - b) Authorizes a local agency or combination of local agencies overlying a groundwater basin to become a GSA for that basin. (WAT. §10723)

2) Under the Political Reform Act (PRA),

- a) Creates the Fair Political Practices Commission (FPPC), and makes it responsible for the impartial, effective administration and implementation of the PRA. (Government Code (GOV.) §§81000 et seq.).
- b) Prohibits a public official at any level of state or local government from making, participating in making, or in any way attempting to use the public official's official position to influence a governmental decision in which the official knows or has reason to know that the official has a financial interest. (GOV. §§87100 et seq.).
- c) Requires candidates for, and current holders of, specified elected or appointed state and local officers and designated employees of state and local agencies to file statements of economic interest (SEI) disclosing their financial interest, including investments, real property interests, and income. (GOV. §§81009 et seq.).

This bill:

- 1) Requires each GSA, by January 1, 2026, to do both of the following:
 - a) Publish on its internet website or its local agency's internet website the membership of its board of directors.
 - b) Publish on its internet website or its local agency's internet website an electronic link to the location on the FPPC's website where the SEIs, filed by members of the GSA's board of directors and executives, can be viewed.

Background

Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA). Under SGMA, a local agency or combination of local agencies overlying a groundwater basin may become a GSA for that basin. A GSA has broad management authority of the groundwater basin or basins under their jurisdiction including defining the basin's or basins' sustainable yield, limiting groundwater extraction, and imposing fees. GSAs are required to consider the interests of all beneficial uses and users of groundwater, including, but not limited to, holders of overlying groundwater rights, municipal well operators, public water systems, local land use planning agencies, environmental users of groundwater, surface water uses, the federal government, California Native American tribes, and disadvantaged communities.

GSAs are authorized to perform any act necessary to carry out the purposes of SGMA, including adopting rules, regulations, and ordinances and developing the GSP.

There are currently more than 260 GSAs formed in 140 basins.

Department of Water Resources (DWR's) SGMA Portal. The SGMA Portal is a tool that gives the public the ability to view and download information related to GSAs, GSPs and alternatives to GSPs, adjudicated areas, and basin boundary modifications. A GSP may include the governance structure of its GSA, including the composition of its Executive Committee.

Political Reform Act of 1974 (PRA). The PRA was a voter-approved initiative that, among other provisions, imposed strict conflict of interest laws and required state and local agencies to establish conflict of interest codes, requiring agency officials who routinely participate in decisions to publicly disclose personal financial information, imposed restrictions on lobbyists, and established the FPPC to enforce the PRA (GOV §§81000 – 91014).

[See Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee analysis for more detailed background.]

Comments

Is information already available? AB 293 requires a GSA to post two things on its website: (1) board of directors membership and (2) a link to the location on the FPPC's website where the SEIs of GSA board members and executives can be found.

Board of directors membership. A random sample of GSPs posted to DWR's SGMA Portal shows that while a GSP will contain a point of contact person, it does not necessarily contain board of directors membership. It is unclear if board membership might be available elsewhere in either the SGMA Portal or DWR's website.

The author's office has provided examples of GSAs that do not post board membership information on their website: Aliso Water District GSA, County of Fresno GSA for the Westside Subbasin, and Grassland GSA. While it is possible to determine Aliso Water District GSA board membership by looking at past board meeting minutes, it would be unclear to the public whether the minutes of a past board meeting will reflect current membership. For County of Fresno, it does not appear that board membership is posted on its website, nor board meeting minutes.

However, SGMA Working Group meeting minutes are posted, with the most recent being from March 2018. The Grassland GSA also does not appear to publish board membership.

However, a random sample of GSA websites, whose information was found through the SGMA Portal, also shows that many GSAs do post board membership information on their website (i.e. Omochumne Hartnell Water District, Santa Clarita Valley GSA, Arvin GSA, Pioneer GSA, and Mid Kaweah GSA).

Thus, posting of board membership across GSAs is inconsistent.

Link to FPPC website. Opponents to the bill argue that with the enactment of SB 1156 (Hurtado, Chapter 458, Statutes of 2024), each board member's SEI is already available on the FPPC website and that AB 293 would single out GSAs by requiring GSAs to post links on its websites to its board members' SEIs. It is also argued that some GSAs have limited staffing and resources and this bill would only add to the extensive list of responsibilities, in addition to trying to achieving groundwater sustainability. However, supporters of this bill argue that providing the link will make it easier for the public to access that information.

FISCAL EFFECT: Appropriation: No Fiscal Com.: No Local: No

SUPPORT: (Verified 6/10/25)

Community Alliance with Family Farmers
Community Water Center
Environmental Defense Fund
Sierra Club

OPPOSITION: (Verified 6/10/25)

Association of California Water Agencies
Valley Ag Water Coalition

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT: According to the author, "AB 293 is a simple step to build public trust, strengthen accountability, and protect one of California's most vital resources for future generations. California's groundwater is a critical resource, supplying anywhere from 30% to 46% of the state's water needs in an average year. Millions of residents, businesses, and farms rely on sustainable groundwater management to ensure long-term water security. Given the growing pressures of climate change and competing demands for water, it is vital that groundwater sustainability agencies (GSAs) operate with the highest level of

transparency and accountability. This bill simply requires GSAs to publish the membership of their Board of Directors on their website as well as a link to the Fair Political Practices Commission (FPPC) for access to their statements of economic interest, ensuring that the public can easily access information about the individuals responsible for managing our groundwater.”

ARGUMENTS IN OPPOSITION: According to the Association of California Water Agencies, “it is unclear why AB 293 is needed” as “existing law already compels special districts to maintain a website, post contact information, and to file statements of economic interest with the FPPC, which houses on its website an easy-to-use transparency portal.” Further, “ACWA is not aware of any other special district or public entity subject to the Political Reform Act that has been specifically required to post their board membership online or a link to the FPPC website.” ACWA further argues that “existing transparency laws, with which all special districts already comply, adequately provide for the goals of this bill without the need for new legislation.”

Additionally, Valley Ag Water Coalition expresses concern that “AB 293 will expose the personal financial affairs of GSA governing board members to greater public scrutiny that will only serve as yet another disincentive to service on GSA governing boards.”

ASSEMBLY FLOOR: 62-5, 4/1/25

AYES: Addis, Aguiar-Curry, Ahrens, Alanis, Arambula, Ávila Farías, Bains, Bauer-Kahan, Bennett, Berman, Boerner, Bonta, Bryan, Caloza, Carrillo, Connolly, DeMaio, Elhawary, Fong, Gabriel, Garcia, Gipson, Mark González, Haney, Harabedian, Hart, Hoover, Irwin, Jackson, Kalra, Krell, Lackey, Lee, Lowenthal, McKinnor, Muratsuchi, Nguyen, Ortega, Papan, Patel, Patterson, Pellerin, Petrie-Norris, Quirk-Silva, Ramos, Ransom, Celeste Rodriguez, Michelle Rodriguez, Rogers, Blanca Rubio, Sanchez, Schiavo, Schultz, Sharp-Collins, Solache, Stefani, Valencia, Wallis, Ward, Wilson, Zbur, Rivas

NOES: Dixon, Ellis, Gallagher, Macedo, Tangipa

NO VOTE RECORDED: Alvarez, Calderon, Castillo, Chen, Davies, Essayli, Flora, Jeff Gonzalez, Hadwick, Pacheco, Soria, Ta, Wicks

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