

“Good Luck Fixing the Problem”: Small Low-Income Community Participation in Collaborative Groundwater Governance and Implications for Drinking Water Source Protection

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Abstract

There is increasing interest in the potential of source water protection to address chronic challenges with small systems and rural drinking water provision. Such a planning and management approach to increasing safe drinking water access, however, will likely require leveraging multi-stakeholder collaborative governance venues to this effect. This paper investigates the prospects of doing so using the case of California’s groundwater reform process known as the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act or SGMA. Interviews with drinking water stakeholders from small low-income communities in the San Joaquin Valley show how existing power and resource disparities limit the prospects of integrating rural drinking water priorities into regional planning. Long-term, more fundamental changes will be needed to meaningfully transform water management in this direction. Short-term state intervention is needed to protect equity and public good goals, raising potential contradictions between devolved water management and improved drinking water access that need to be addressed.

Keywords: Collaborative governance, drinking water, environmental justice, equity, governance, groundwater, small water systems, source water protection, rural, water resources