



JOINT RESPONSE

REPORT TITLE: 2025-2026 Monterey County Civil Grand Jury Final Report - Seawater Intrusion – A Shared Problem in Monterey County

RESPONSE BY: The County of Monterey Board of Supervisors
The Monterey County Water Resources Agency Board of Directors

UPDATES TO: Finding & Recommendation #2
Finding & Recommendation #3

FINDING (F2)

The existing CSIP (Castroville Seawater Intrusion Project) and related facilities, including the Salinas Valley Reclamation Project and Salinas River Diversion Facility, provide alternative water supplies to portions of the northern Salinas Valley. However, comparable infrastructure has not been implemented in other areas experiencing groundwater stress. This uneven distribution of alternative supplies limits basin-wide progress toward reducing groundwater pumping.

RESPONSE TO F2:

The Board of Supervisors and the Board of Directors of the Water Resource Agency agree with the finding.

RECOMMENDATION (F2)

The Board of Directors of the Monterey County Water Resources Agency prepare and publicly present a feasibility and financing plan identifying options to expand existing alternative water supply infrastructure, or develop new projects, including the Castroville-Eastside Project, to reduce groundwater extraction in coastal aquifers outside the current Castroville service area by March 31, 2027.

RESPONSE TO F2:

The recommendation will not be implemented because it is impractical. As the Report correctly states, it is the Salinas Valley Basin Groundwater Sustainability Agency (SVBGSA) that was formed and is charged with developing solutions to meet State mandates under the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA). The Agency's role in this regard has been to provide technical support for the SVBGSA's planning efforts. The SVBGSA has recently completed six feasibility studies to examine potential solutions to our groundwater challenges, including seawater intrusion, and is currently in the process of developing a

portfolio of those potential solutions to present to the California Department of Water Resources as part of the required five-year updates to its Groundwater Sustainability Plans, due in January 2027.

For the Agency to step forward separately on one project out of the many currently under consideration would exacerbate public confusion regarding roles and responsibilities as they apply to SGMA compliance, would run the risk of duplicative efforts, or worse, competing proposals, both of which would only add cost to our shared base of ratepayers, and would not guarantee an improved outcome. The future role of the Agency with respect to implementation of groundwater solutions will be determined at the time specific projects are identified as being feasible and then move forward into the design and permitting phase. That may or may not include action by the Agency.

FINDING (F3)

If any of the subbasins within the Salinas Valley Basin fails to meet state-mandated groundwater sustainability requirements under SGMA, the State Water Resources Control Board may intervene, which could result in mandatory pumping reductions and increased regulatory oversight. This would impact local agriculture and economies and reduces local control. Avoiding State intervention requires the timely implementation of groundwater sustainability projects and the identification of reliable funding mechanisms. Absent such decisions, planned groundwater sustainability projects may remain conceptual and seawater intrusion in affected aquifers may continue to progress.

RESPONSE TO F3:

The Board of Supervisors and the Board of Directors of the Water Resources Agency agree with the finding.

RECOMMENDATION (R3)

The Monterey County Board of Supervisors conduct a publicly noticed study session to evaluate long-term funding mechanisms to support groundwater sustainability projects developed by SVBGSA and direct staff to report back with recommended funding options by June 30, 2027.

RESPONSE TO R3:

The recommendation has not yet been implemented but will be implemented in the future. Staff will be directed to provide a status report back to the Board regarding recommended

funding options by June 30, 2027. The Board and the Agency recommend that the purpose of a publicly noticed forum be expanded to consider a wider array of water management challenges as many problems and solutions are interrelated, with consequences extending beyond any one entity's specific service area boundary.

Monterey County's water systems were built upon bold initiative and long-term vision. Today, however, aging infrastructure, climate change, deteriorating groundwater conditions, and increasing demands, driven by changing land use and state promulgated housing and groundwater sustainability mandates, bring the County to a point where we again face a critical moment that will demand significant leadership and investment. To effectively manage the future, it is important to come together to define the scale of our collective water and economic challenges in order to identify opportunities to better serve our County as a whole.

The Civil Grand Jury Report appropriately recognizes that within Monterey County there are many local water agencies, each with their own legal authorities, governance structures, and water management responsibilities. Many are currently engaged in individual efforts, or contained collaborations, planning projects or actions, some of which overlap, to address current and future water needs. Individually, these proposals are significant in their importance and, for many, in their cost. Collectively, the sum of these proposals, if implemented in similar timeframes, could create an overwhelming financial burden upon the communities served and an environment wherein decisions made by individual entities could adversely impact the economic wellbeing of other entities, including the County, and, by extension, the economy shared by Monterey County residents.

To avoid this undesirable result, the Board of Supervisors propose to establish, through the Agency, a forum for regionalizing water management planning and development to move beyond isolated, local planning efforts and, instead, develop an integrated regional strategy that together addresses water supply reliability, flood management, groundwater sustainability, ecosystem needs, and long-term economic stability for our communities. This regional strategy would aim to explore, develop, and implement practical solutions, including consideration of potential management actions, expanded groundwater recharge, new conveyance and storage investments, both above and below ground, enhanced floodwater management, and reservoir operations.

Regional collaboration is vital if Monterey County is going to successfully move from planning to implementation on a meaningful scale. By building partnerships and establishing community-based priorities across the region, we can help better prioritize

funding needs and address affordability, bring focused technical assistance and permitting support, and improve interagency coordination by providing a locally supported roadmap for future water projects and investments. A regional level of planning will also help enhance state and federal support, streamline the necessary planning and environmental review processes, and strengthen coordination among regulatory agencies thereby reducing costs while improving the likelihood of success. Only through broad partnerships, aligned priorities, and collaborative action across local, state, and federal levels can we develop a suitable level of water supply reliability to support the long-term health of the communities, economies, and families of Monterey County, not just agriculture or water agencies alone.

Creating long-term funding mechanisms to support existing infrastructure and new water resource development will require a comprehensive and cohesive funding strategy comprised of several elements. First, we must recognize that independent action to fund individual projects could have broader economic consequences, potentially on a County-wide scale. This requires us to look beyond individual projects and consider a proposal's effects upon our shared economy. To avoid unintended, potentially catastrophic, financial impacts, we should identify known project proposals and estimated costs and develop a system of prioritization and periodic reevaluation. Second, we must develop a communications strategy that unifies and amplifies the County's voice to express a cohesive and consistent message about water matters. Moving forward, we can collaborate for limited local, state, and federal funding, or compete against each other for it.

Success will require balancing community needs for new source supplies, groundwater sustainability, infrastructure investment, and water supply resilience. Monterey County communities are already experiencing the real-world impacts of aging infrastructure, water supply limitations, deteriorating groundwater quality, and declining groundwater levels, particularly in our disadvantaged communities. Science-based, practical, and coordinated solutions are needed to ensure both reliable water supplies and economic stability across the region.

The Board of Supervisors understand clearly that the choices made over the next several years will determine whether Monterey County preserves its treasured rural communities and our world-class agricultural economy, or whether we give way to the scale of urbanization that has irrevocably altered the culture, communities, and landscape of many other, once similar California regions.