

Subcommittee on Water and Power
Committee on Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Oversight Field Hearing on “*Sustainable Water Supplies for the West: Part 1 – Protecting Groundwater Resources*”
Tuesday, April 10, 2007, 9:00 a.m.
The Kellogg West Conference Center
California State Polytechnic University

TESTIMONY OF
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Good morning, Madam Chairwoman, Committee members, and staff. My name is Michael Whitehead and I am a member of the Board of Directors of the San Gabriel Basin Water Quality Authority. Let me express my appreciation to Congresswoman Grace Napolitano, Congressman David Dreier, Congresswoman Hilda Solis, Congressman Adam Schiff, Congresswoman Lucille Roybal-Allard, and Congressman Gary Miller for their unwavering support and efforts in helping to restore the San Gabriel Groundwater Basin.

The San Gabriel Basin underlies 167 square miles of the San Gabriel Valley. The San Gabriel Basin holds hundreds of thousands of acre-feet of local, renewable, public drinking water supplies. In fact, the San Gabriel Basin provides a reliable, local drinking water supply for the more than one million people who reside and work in the San Gabriel Valley.

Beginning in the early 1980s, industrial contaminants have been discovered in the groundwater in the San Gabriel Basin aquifer. Those contaminants are the unfortunate legacy of unregulated discharges from defense-related industries during the cold-war era of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Contaminants such as Perchlorate, Volatile Organic Compounds, and other industrial chemicals in the groundwater led to the closure of many dozens of drinking water wells in the San Gabriel Valley. The resulting crisis led to the United States Environmental Protection Agency placing the San Gabriel groundwater basin on the EPA’s National Priorities List. In other words, the Basin became one of the nation’s largest superfund sites. But that allowed the EPA to take necessary investigatory and enforcement actions to identify the potentially responsible parties and to develop information needed to formulate groundwater cleanup plans. Though the EPA’s actions have been extraordinarily helpful, the EPA did not undertake the job of cleaning up the Basin itself, and it has been in no position to provide funding to local agencies for that purpose.

To satisfy the need for a locally-based entity to provide leadership and unified planning, the California State Legislature in 1993 created the San Gabriel Basin Water Quality Authority to plan, coordinate, and accelerate the San Gabriel Basin groundwater cleanup efforts. Since its

inception, the Water Quality Authority has developed and funded projects that have removed over 20 tons of contaminants and treated over 312,000 acre-feet of groundwater in the San Gabriel Basin.

The Water Quality Authority has been aided by two federal programs—the San Gabriel Basin Restoration Fund (“Restoration Fund”) and the Title XVI program. These two programs have been a catalyst in the success of our remediation efforts. Both programs have enabled us to continue the collaborative approach of merging groundwater cleanup with restoring public drinking water supplies. It has allowed us to leverage federal dollars and local funding to bring all parties, including the parties potentially responsible for the contamination, to the table and work in a manner that addresses multiple issues at the same time.

Through the leadership of Congresswoman Napolitano, Congressman David Dreier, and the members of the San Gabriel Valley Congressional Delegation, Congress created the Restoration Fund in December of 2000. The Restoration Fund is providing \$75 million in federal matching funding for groundwater restoration projects in the San Gabriel Basin and \$10 million for projects near the Whittier Narrows in the Central Basin. The Restoration Fund has provided urgently needed funding for local groundwater remediation efforts to assure reliable, safe drinking water supplies for our community. Congresswoman Napolitano, together with Congressman Dreier and their colleagues moved decisively to establish the Restoration Fund as a means of expediting the remediation of the very valuable local groundwater supplies.

The Restoration Fund has provided an incentive for the Responsible Parties in the San Gabriel Basin to participate in the cleanup and reach funding agreements with the Water Quality Authority and the affected local water suppliers. The funding has also allowed the Water Quality Authority and the affected water suppliers to fund projects even before Responsible Parties could be identified or when Responsible Parties are no longer viable, cannot be located, or are recalcitrant. Without this additional federal funding, the likelihood for additional well closures would be great, leaving only the option of turning to costly and already overburdened imported water supplies.

In light of the remarkable success of the Restoration Fund and its profound impact on the local cleanup efforts, Congressman David Dreier and his colleagues in the San Gabriel Valley Congressional Delegation have introduced HR 123. HR 123 would increase the ceiling on the Restoration Fund by \$50 million for a total authorization of \$135 million. This additional funding would allow us to continue the progress we’ve made and allow us to avoid enormously costly litigation that only serves to delay the cleanup of local drinking water supplies.

Similarly, the Title XVI program has provided the San Gabriel Basin with the ability to provide much needed wellhead treatment, stem the flow of contaminants, stabilize water rates, and most importantly deliver safe and reliable drinking water to the residents of the San Gabriel Valley.

In 2004, Congresswoman Napolitano and her colleagues in the San Gabriel Valley Congressional Delegation introduced and passed HR 1284 which increased the ceiling on the San Gabriel Basin Demonstration Project by \$6.5 million. This increase resulted in a total

authorization of \$44.5 million for local cleanup efforts. The additional funding has allowed the Water Quality Authority to maintain the crucial momentum toward implementing groundwater cleanup we've seen in the San Gabriel Basin.

In the time period since the Restoration Fund and Title XVI program were made available to the Water Quality Authority, thirty-four projects have been allocated funding. Twenty projects have been built and another eight are currently under construction with completion expected by the end of summer.

For example, with the completion of four major groundwater cleanup projects developed and implemented through the Water Quality Authority with the cooperation of local water suppliers, participating Responsible Parties, and the U.S. EPA, we will be removing perchlorate and other toxic chemicals from groundwater at the rate of 24,000 gallons per minute on a 24/7 year-round basis. These projects will continue to provide safe drinking water to residents and businesses in Baldwin Park, La Puente, West Covina, the City of Industry, and surrounding areas for decades to come without burdening the public with higher water bills.

Without the funding for the treatment facilities, local water suppliers would have been forced to shut down more water wells due to rapidly migrating contamination. The well closures would have forced local water suppliers to become reliant on imported water, which would come mainly from the Colorado River. And as you know, California's allotment from the Colorado River water is being cut back. This would have severely impaired our ability to provide water for the residents and businesses in the San Gabriel Valley.

Water from wells in the San Gabriel Valley is relatively inexpensive to pump and supply to homes and businesses. The current price for an acre-foot of treated, ready-to-drink Colorado River water in the high-demand summer period is approaching \$500. The typical cost to pump, treat, and deliver an acre-foot of local San Gabriel Basin groundwater is \$65 to \$250 depending on the levels and types of contamination being treated.

It is vital that we restore the San Gabriel Basin aquifer which as I mentioned is an essential, local, renewable water supply. Once we are able to remediate the contamination it is our belief that the San Gabriel Valley will be able to use the groundwater aquifer to meet most, if not all, of our local water needs. Removing harmful contaminants from our communities' groundwater supply will allow local water suppliers to better meet the needs of local residents for safe drinking water at affordable rates and makes certain that the groundwater basin is able to meet the water supply needs of future generations.

The federal assistance provided by the Restoration Fund and the Title XVI program have allowed us to carry out our mission of facilitating groundwater cleanup and providing a clean, reliable drinking water supplies for the more than one million residents of the San Gabriel Valley.

Thank you for allowing me to testify on the successes of the San Gabriel Basin Water Quality Authority and the important on-going progress of the cleanup of the San Gabriel Basin today.