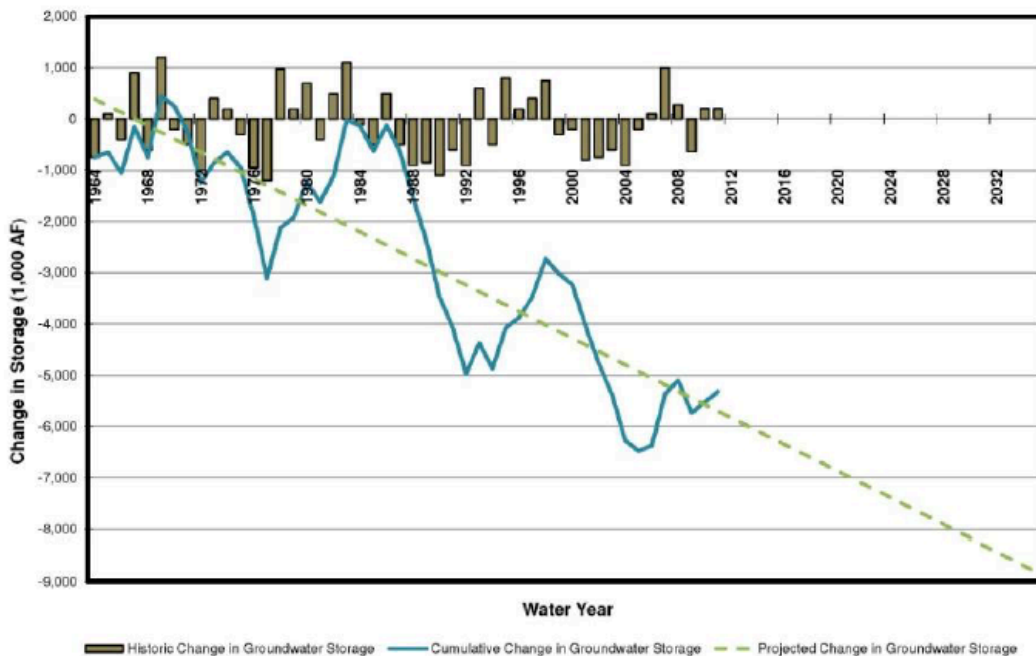


Case Study 4: Kings Basin Integrated Regional Water Management Plan (IRWMP)

In a region dominated by agriculture, expanding urban development and declining groundwater levels, stakeholders from the Kings Groundwater Basin have found that coming together around the integrated regional water management plan (IRWMP) builds relationships and provides a roadmap for more multi-faceted regional approaches to water management. These regional-scale approaches to water management are better able to address the intersections between land use planning and groundwater management.

Background

The Kings Basin Integrated Regional Water Management Plan (IRWMP) is a collaborative effort between 54 public, private and non-governmental agencies to manage water resources in the Kings Groundwater Basin, a sub-basin of the San Joaquin Valley Groundwater Basin. The Kings Basin IRWMP covers 610,000 acres, of which 480,000 acres, or 79 percent of the total, are used for irrigated agriculture.¹ Groundwater overdraft is generally considered the largest regional problem (Figure 5). Overdraft is estimated to be 100,000 to 150,000 acre-feet per year.² One of the main goals of the IRWMP is to stop groundwater overdraft in the Kings Basin and reverse declining groundwater levels.



Historical and Projected Groundwater Level Decline

Figure 5. Historical and projected groundwater levels in the Kings Groundwater Basin. Source: Kings Basin IRWMP

¹ Kings Basin Water Authority, Kings Basin Integrated Regional Water Management Plan, 2012.

² Ibid.

Several local agencies in the Kings River region came together in 2000 with a growing awareness that a different way of looking at water was necessary. Around this same time, the California Senate passed SB1672, the Integrated Regional Water Management Act (2002), to encourage local agencies to work cooperatively to manage local and imported water supplies. The aim was to improve quality, quantity and reliability. Soon after, voters passed Proposition 50 in 2002 and Proposition 84 in 2006, directing the Department of Water Resources to offer \$500 million and \$1 billion, respectively, in funding for integrated regional water management planning and implementation.³ This funding opportunity gave incentives to other regional entities — cities, counties, irrigation districts, and nongovernmental organizations — to come to the table. Motivated by these new laws, the Kings River water forum eventually formalized as a joint powers authority in 2009 and became known as the Kings Basin Water Authority. The first water management plan from the authority was completed in 2007. This plan was redone in 2012 to meet new state requirements.

The plan, or IRWMP, is a reflection of the existing integration of land use planning with water planning across the region. Issues covered include water supply, water quality, flood management, groundwater recharge, conjunctive water use, treatment facilities, water conservation, general plan policies, and planning and development review. The plan is nonbinding; its strength lies in the IRWMP process that allows committed planners and resource managers to collaborate on a regional vision and determine the actions that they should take to realize their collective goals. For the authority, this includes stopping groundwater overdraft in the basin and reversing declining groundwater levels. Achievement of goals may require local land use agencies to ensure consistency between the IRWMP and their planning documents. For instance, groundwater recharge areas are mapped in the IRWMP and provide an opportunity for local jurisdictions to consider appropriate zoning for these areas.

Benefits and Challenges

Partnerships, funding opportunities, operational connectivity, as well as increased awareness of planning efforts and potential projects are key benefits of the IRWMP process for Kings Basin.⁴ However, local agencies involved in the IRWMP process cite the cultivation of relationships as being the greatest benefit. The IRWMP process highlights the need for land use planners to be cognizant of water throughout the planning process. Heightened awareness of water issues and relationships between the IRWMP members now make it likely that outreach and coordination on water and land use policies will not only happen, but will proceed from a deeper baseline of knowledge and trust.

³ Department of Water Resources, 'Integrated Regional Water Management Grants,' available at water.ca.gov/irwm/grants/index.cfm.

⁴ Kings Basin Water Authority, Kings Basin Integrated Regional Water Management Plan, 2012.

The IRWMP planning process is not without its challenges. One challenge is that future state funding for IWRM plans and projects is uncertain. The Kings Basin IRWMP has successfully obtained DWR funding for planning and implementation over the past few years. In addition to two state-funded plans, funded projects at the intersection of groundwater and land use include groundwater recharge basins and flood-control facilities that help meet IRWMP goals. Each project has involved multiple partners and significant local and regional outreach efforts. Other projects include an integrated groundwater and surface water model, water meter installation and river trails. But Proposition 50 and 84 funding is nearly exhausted, so alternative funding mechanisms need to be explored. Despite the uncertainty, there seems to be agreement that IRWMP engagement has helped shaped a new norm for regional coordination that will not disappear even as funding changes over time.

Other challenges include programmatic funding and stakeholder fatigue. Programmatic funding provides for the administration and implementation of the IRWMP, which is not included in the state funding. By law, paying members and nonpaying “interested parties” have the same ability to influence decisions by the advisory council and board of directors.⁵ Paying members are starting to explore creative options for reducing their own fees, which could further impact programmatic funding for the IRWMP. Stakeholder fatigue is another issue. Given the complexity of water issues, the IRWMP group must meet frequently. A deep commitment to the outcome and process is required to keep members energized and invested.

What has enabled the success of the Kings River IRWMP?

Several factors have contributed to the success of the Kings River IRWMP process. A shared vision among several local agencies in the region that jointly recognized the need for a more integrated approach to water management was vital, as was the leadership and administration of the Kings River Conservation District. Key people believed in the IRWMP process and got themselves and their staffs involved. Relationships between members existed to a certain degree, so the group was able to leverage those connections toward building a regional vision. Finally, the financial resources from both local and state agencies facilitated the process.

What is the outcome?

The Kings River IRWMP process has evolved to embrace a truly regional perspective based on a better understanding of each member’s issues and concerns. This partnership enables members to use the network for outreach, education, collaboration and expertise to achieve better water management. While long-term data is not yet available to quantify tangible benefits on the ground, one clear indication of the success of the Kings River IRWMP is its ability to obtain grant

⁵ California Water Code governing the formation of the Regional Water Management Groups such as the Kings Basin Water Authority states that no one is restricted from participating based on ability to pay.

funding for plans and projects, which highlights the state's confidence in the region's ability to work together to achieve results.

What is the primary lesson to be drawn from this case study?

The IRWMP is a dialogue about water and land use, not about individual projects. Getting all parties involved in a functioning regional partnership is not easy, and requires that all involved parties want the process to succeed. True regional collaboration is a time-consuming process that requires dedication, financial resources and frequent communication. Despite the challenges, the IRWMP process has been worthwhile for the Kings Basin because long-term goals have been created and the way forward has become clearer, with many goals likely to be achieved.

Recognizing the alternative of the IRWMP process — mandated participation because water is not available to support people and the land — helps all parties to fully engage in the process. The IRWMP framework could be utilized by federal agencies as vehicles for partnerships, outreach, policy implementation and funding.