

Coordination Under California's Sustainable Groundwater Management

Embedded within SGMA is a mandate for coordination to achieve groundwater sustainability. Coordination can occur formally and informally through multiple means, including the formation of multi-agency GSAs, basin coordination agreements, inter-basin agreements, representation on boards, etc. Where multiple GSPs are developed in a basin, the mandate explicitly requires coordination to ensure the entire basin is managed sustainably. Thus GSAs must demonstrate consistency in the data, methods and interpretations of the basin setting, and show they are using a coordinated data management system (CWC § 357.4). In essence, SGMA's objective is to ensure concordance in understandings and activities within groundwater basins. Achieving this agreement requires coordinating management efforts across administrative, legal, and technical realms.

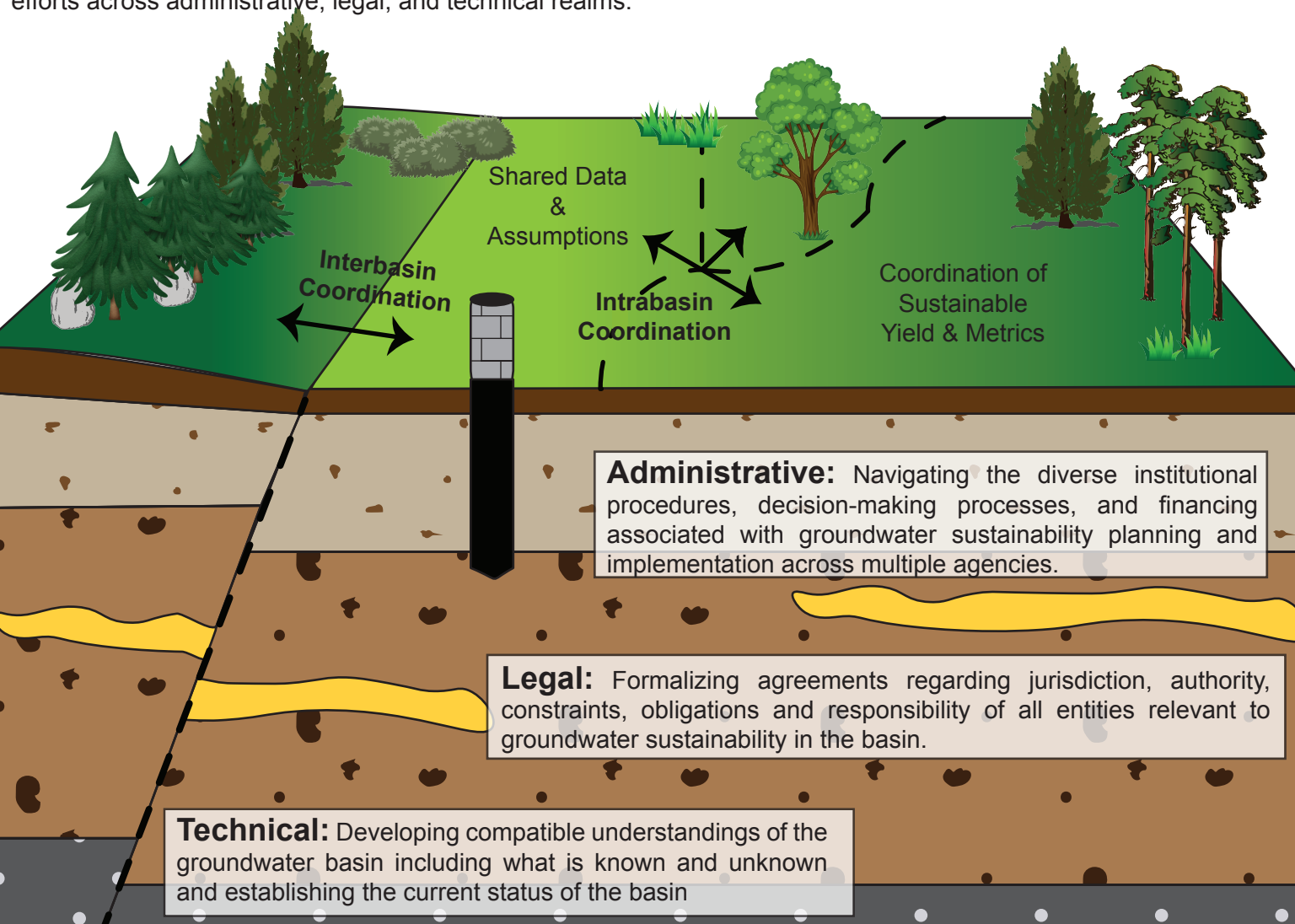


Figure 1. For GSAs to meet the explicit coordination requirements in SGMA, they must engage in a deeper level of coordination across interconnected administrative, legal, and technical realms.

Administrative - More than Meetings

Achieving groundwater sustainability at the basin level requires coordination across multiple entities. Each GSA, and each of the agencies forming GSAs has its own requirements for decision-making, communication and approval processes, managing financing, etc. External requirements on public agencies also dictate procedures GSAs and member agencies must follow (e.g., the Brown Act, Public Records Act, etc.). Further, coordination must occur across topics generally managed by differing individuals or departments within an agency. What may work for one agency may fall outside of the regular operating or administrative procedures of another.

Legal - Beyond MOUs

Development and implementation of groundwater sustainability plans involves navigating a complex web of authorities and responsibilities. GSAs and their member agencies are bound by responsibilities and requirements prior to and beyond SGMA, including compliance with other laws and regulations (e.g., CEQA, Porter Cologne, etc.) While SGMA recognizes and does not alter surface water rights or the non-groundwater authorities of GSA member agencies, GSAs and their member agencies have concerns about how GSPs may commit them to policies, practices and expenditures as well as their ability to fulfill those commitments. Coordination under SGMA requires identifying and navigating these concerns so as to formalize commitments and responsibilities in a productive and proactive way.

Technical - Deeper than Data Sharing

Implementation of SGMA requires substantial knowledge and expertise as well as an ability to interrogate data, communicate results across perspectives, and bridge differences in knowledge. Compliance will require reaching consensus or demonstrating compatibility between methods for interpreting incomplete or imperfect information. These issues are complicated by variation in knowledge; data quality and availability, including the timing and methods used for data collection; and the statistical and modeling methods used to analyze data. Consultants can facilitate technical coordination, yet they too will differ in their interpretations of data, preferences for methods and understandings of the requirements of SGMA.

- ★ Plan for administrative coordination from the start: designate trusted leadership entities charged with overseeing coordination and identify clear channels and pathways for communication.
- ★ Where GSP development includes separate planning and technical committees, develop a clear allocation of decision-making authority, decision-making procedures and mechanisms for communication across committees.
- ★ Navigating diverse institutional environments and their operating requirements may require developing new procedures. Start by understanding existing procedures, learning how those procedures can be altered, and the timelines necessary to do so.

- ★ Communicate clearly how groundwater sustainability planning and implementation will influence constituents, so as to reduce misperceptions that may lead to tensions.
- ★ Coordinate with all entities with jurisdiction over water and land to ensure GSPs do not conflict with other planning efforts.
- ★ Identify a comprehensive list of laws and regulations that may affect groundwater sustainability and implementation of GSPs.
- ★ Adopt a forward thinking legal perspective, encourage counsel to think collaboratively rather than delaying decisions or adopting protective perspectives
- ★ Consider the value of facilitative processes in achieving inter-agency coordination.

- ★ Develop mechanisms to promote and facilitate learning, open discussion, and a willingness to bridge ways of thinking.
- ★ Provide the time and forums necessary for and encourage learning and exchange between consultants, decision makers, and stakeholders.
- ★ Ensure technical consultants communicate to decision-makers the implications of the methodologies used and assumptions embedded in the analyses.

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This briefing stems from a collaborative research project seeking to improve understandings of challenges and provide best practices related to mandated horizontal coordination in groundwater management and planning. The initial results presented here are based on interviews with over 40 representatives from GSAs in the critically over-drafted basins. For examples of administrative, legal and technical coordination innovations or to share your GSA's innovations, contact us. We would love to make your story part of these findings! Please contact amilman@eco.umass.edu.

For more information see: <https://watergovernance.umasscreate.net/groundwater-sustainability/sgma/>