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#### EDITORIALS

# On Paso groundwater, conservative supervisors act like 'Big Government' bullies



*By The Tribune Editorial Board*

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What kind of Orwellian universe is this?



The conservative majority on the San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors — to whom private property rights and local control have been sacrosanct — [has refused to allow a group](#) of North County landowners to represent themselves in groundwater sustainability planning.

Instead, the county will maintain control, essentially robbing the largest group of rural water users in the Paso area of an independent voice.

The board's 3-2 vote went against not only the landowner group, it also was contrary to the recommendation of the County Farm Bureau, the Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance and county staff.

But wait! It gets worse. The decision came only after the landowners in the Estrella-El Pomar-Creston Water District went through a lengthy formation process and spent approximately \$300,000 on planning and applications — and after the board had given preliminary indication that it would agree to the plan.

But when the time came to vote on Tuesday, the board majority said it feared the group would have too much control in the collaborative process of developing a state-mandated groundwater management plan. (The group includes the county, represented by Supervisor John Peschong; the city of Paso Robles; the Shandon-San Juan Water District; the San Miguel CSD; and the Heritage Ranch CSD.) The new landowner group would have been a sixth member, and would have had a 29 percent vote.

That would have decreased the county's voting power from 61 to 32 percent.

“I think that’s the scariest part of this,” said Board of Supervisors Chairman John Peschong.

No, Chairman Peschong, the scariest part is that the county would continue to exercise majority control, because it’s the county’s poor stewardship of water resources that landed the Paso basin in trouble in the first place.

Remember that?

For years, the board essentially ignored declines in the groundwater basin until landowners whose wells were drying up demanded that something be done, and until the state passed landmark legislation mandating groundwater management.



Karl Luft talks Friday, Jan. 22, 2016, about the impact falling groundwater levels have had on the wells on his Templeton property. [Joe Johnston](mailto:jjohnston@thetribunenews.com) — [jjohnston@thetribunenews.com](mailto:jjohnston@thetribunenews.com)

So, no, we don't have a lot of faith in the county's ability to protect our natural resources, especially water.

As for the Estrella-El Pomar-Creston group somehow "bullying" others into following their lead, that's not going to happen, since the state requires that all participants in groundwater management planning reach a consensus.

And if that's still not good enough for the Board of Supervisors, the landowner group was willing to negotiate on its percentage of voting rights — to no avail as it turned out.

As for the fear that landowners in Estrella-El Pomar-Creston will "steal" water and export it, that's a red herring, since the county has already taken precautions to prevent that.

In 2014, the Board of Supervisors [unanimously passed an ordinance](#) requiring anyone seeking to export groundwater out of a basin or across county lines to obtain a permit. An export permit would only be approved if the public works director finds that moving the water would not have any adverse impacts on groundwater resources, such as causing aquifer levels to drop, disrupting the flow of neighboring wells or resulting in seawater intrusion.

Is that not strong enough? Then pass another ordinance prohibiting export of water altogether.

But stop pretending that you're interested in maintaining control for the common good.

The line "we're from the government and we're here to help" is never convincing, especially coming from a conservative majority that's long preached the evils of Big Government.

Look in the mirror, supervisors, because as it turns out, Big Government is you.