



University of California | Agriculture and Natural Resources

California Institute for Water Resources

Developing solutions to California's water-related challenges

Newsletter | Volume 4, Issue 2 | September 2017

Access, power, and money in California groundwater governance



Casey Walsh

Faith Kearns interviews **Casey Walsh**, associate professor of anthropology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His research focuses in part on ways water, land, and labor have been organized to produce commodities in arid areas. He wrote **Building the Borderlands**, and his new book, **Virtuous Waters**, will be released early next year.

You're currently working on issues related to groundwater in California. Can you tell us a little more about your focus?

I have been following the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) process as it unfolds in both the Paso Robles and Cuyama groundwater basins in the Central Coast of California. I am mostly an academic observer, but sometimes I participate when I have something to contribute not already present. As an anthropologist, I'm particularly interested in the themes of access, power, and money. And how those things play out is fairly different in these different basins.

Can you describe some of the differences that you are seeing?

In Paso Robles there are numerous landowners of all sizes, many of them well educated. As a result, active citizens are well-informed about SGMA process and legislation, local hydrology, and the beneficial uses of groundwater. The process of groundwater management in Paso Robles has been very public for this reason, which I think is good, although it is slow and difficult. There, I don't have a lot to say that people don't already know.

In Cuyama, there are few residents and the whole process of groundwater use and management is dominated by a few industrial farming companies. There is not a robust population there to get involved in SGMA, and I think my perspective is needed more.

For example, I have given public comments at meetings of the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors, and at informational meetings held as part of the public outreach for the Groundwater Sustainability Agency formation in Cuyama. I speak up when I don't hear anyone else saying things that need to be said, or when I sense that public participation in the SGMA process is not present, valued, or encouraged.

What's been most interesting to you about the SGMA process?

As a novice to formal politics, I have been surprised that in the SGMA process, county governments usually do not really seek out, and often actually try to limit, public participation in the process of managing groundwater. The anthropological literature about sustainable water systems around the world shows that generalized public knowledge about, and involvement with, water management is a must for sustainability. However, in California it sometimes seems that some folks in government and business are trying to achieve sustainability with as little public participation as possible.

In my experience so far, participation of most people in groundwater politics is limited to three-minute statements in public hearings, letters filed on webpages, and perhaps a brief audience with a sympathetic county supervisor. I get it that county administrators charged with the new SGMA workload are very busy and understandably not excited about having to explain things to folks who come knocking. But it then becomes difficult for most citizens to become engaged in the management of their groundwater because it is hard to learn about the law, about the hydrology, and about the way that counties administer the resource.

This is not true in every groundwater basin or county, but in general the state needs a groundwater education program to get people thinking about the resource as theirs, as their responsibility. After all, SGMA asserts that California groundwater is a common-pool resource, but we are a long way from managing it that way.

What's it like as an anthropologist working on groundwater?

Anthropological research takes many forms, but what it offers is the local perspective that very few other approaches can gather. Some anthropologists do very systematic research with survey questionnaires; I prefer to get to know people and learn what I can about how things are working in a particular place. This focus on local knowledge can be confusing, because the anthropologist might look like he or she is just hanging out or snooping around.

When I just started the research, I visited a public meeting in Paso Robles convened by a local organizer. After the meeting, I gave her my proposal for studying the relationship between wine production and groundwater depletion. She told me right then I had gotten it wrong; that the real problem was water banking and markets. She asked if I was one of the UC Santa Barbara folks interested in water markets. I assured her I was not, and that I was trying to understand how the process of water management was unfolding in Paso Robles.

However, this local knowledge is delicate. The next time I contacted her she said that she wouldn't talk to me until she was sure why I was doing this research project. We haven't spoken since because I haven't mustered the courage to call her back.

I felt bad that I didn't come across as trustworthy, but with some research under my belt I completely understand and respect her caution. Water is hugely important in California, and the SGMA stakes are really high. Fortunes will be made and lost depending on how the process of groundwater management unfolds.

The role of the anthropologist is not to take sides, but to show how it works. To protect identities of people I never write their names in my notes and publications. The goal is not to report on people, but to understand the social and cultural dynamics of groundwater management.

Our mission is to integrate California's research, extension, and higher education programs to develop solutions to water resource challenges.

Web: ciwr.ucanr.edu | Blog: ucanr.edu/blogs/confluence | Twitter: [@ucanrwater](https://twitter.com/ucanrwater)

Survey: Help us with our strategic plan!

The California Institute for Water Resources is developing a five year strategic plan. We have brought together a dynamic planning committee with prominent California water stakeholders to assist us in the planning process.

The strategic planning committee would greatly appreciate five minutes of your time to complete a survey about our activities. Your input will inform our choices as we develop goals and directions so that the Institute can best serve you, the University of California, and Californians in the future. Understanding your experience with CIWR is extremely valuable to us, and we thank you for your time and consideration.

Please take the survey:
bit.ly/2wCmr7z

We would appreciate your responses by Friday, September 29.

Technical review for state grant programs

The California Institute for Water Resources is working with the California Department of Food and Agriculture to provide reviews on three important grant programs.

Scientists in UC Agriculture and Natural Resources and multiple University of California campuses are providing scientific review for:

- 1) the [Statewide Water Efficiency and Enhancement Program](#), which is focused on irrigation technology,
- 2) the [Dairy Digester Program](#), which supports the installation of dairy digesters in California, resulting in reduced greenhouse gas emissions and
- 3) the [Healthy Soils Program](#), which is focused on building soil carbon and reduce agricultural greenhouse gas emissions.

Institute activity highlights

Doug Parker, CIWR Director, recently finished his term as President of the [Universities Council on Water Resources \(UCOWR\)](#). During his term, UCOWR hosted its largest conference ever with over 320 participants convening at Colorado State University. UCOWR continues to grow its membership, and its [Journal of Contemporary Water Research and Education](#) was recently listed on the Emerging Sources Citation Index from Clarivate Analytics. Additionally, in our last newsletter we told you about Doug's participation in the [Systems Thinking Conference](#) at Cornell University. Presentations from that conference are [now available](#).

Faith Kearns, CIWR Academic Coordinator, along with co-organizer **Clare Gupta** of UC Davis, led a small workshop on relationship-centered approaches to engaging on contentious issues like climate change. The workshop gave the opportunity to interact with colleagues from law, medicine, and psychology and was supported by [Invoking the Pause](#). It built upon a book chapter and [New Republic article](#) she wrote, and her recent presentation as part of a [climate change capacity building](#) workshop with University of Hawai'i-Manoa Cooperative Extension.

The [research project](#) by **Roya Bahreini** of UC Riverside supported through our Junior Investigator grant program resulted in a peer-reviewed paper on air quality issues around the shrinking Salton Sea. The new study was covered by multiple news outlets, and included a [great story](#) by Ian James of the *Desert Sun*.

The Confluence: New on our blog

Here are just some of our most recent articles. You can follow and subscribe at: ucanr.edu/blogs/confluence.

Determining how many fish a long dammed river could sustain

by F. Kearns

On a long dammed river in northwestern California, researchers are determining how many Chinook salmon and steelhead trout could live upstream if given the means to pass. The endeavor has meant intensive field work in some of the most remote parts of the state...[READ MORE](#)



Emily Cooper

Making the invisible visible: Home water use, city infrastructure, and participatory design

by F. Kearns

For the majority of Californians, water appears effortlessly when and where you need it. It shows up in your faucet and flows out of your backyard hose with just the turn of a handle. And, it leaves just as predictably – rinsed down your kitchen sink drain, flushed down your toilet. However, the outgoing water is often full of things like fats, oils, and greases that can lead to problems in local sewer systems and beyond...[READ MORE](#)



Mary Rubin

Working with wild horses and water controversies in rural California

by F. Kearns

Watering holes can be hard to come by in the high desert of northeastern California. Pronghorn, deer, cattle, and wild horses are all visitors to the springs and ponds scattered across the often dry grasslands. The number of wild horses has jumped quickly in recent years, bringing a host of water-related challenges, and no small amount of controversy...[READ MORE](#)



Laura Snell

Extreme precipitation and groundwater storage in California

by M. Safeeq

California's recent drought was the worst in memory. However, in a relatively quick turnaround, this year the state's water infrastructure is full and water managers battled the wettest winter on record in quite some time. The uniquely wet winter of 2016-2017 has highlighted a key issue surrounding our water storage infrastructure: We could have stored this abundant water, not in new reservoirs, but right under our feet...[READ MORE](#)



Michelle Gilmore