Senate Bill 1317
Aquifer Protection Act
By Senator Lois Wolk

Bill Summary
Senate Bill 1317 protects California’s aquifers from permanent damage due to rapidly increasing water extraction and critical overdraft. Specifically, this bill:
1) Requires that by July 1, 2017, cities and counties overlying high and medium priority basins establish conditional use permits for new wells. All new well permits shall include conditions to avoid undesirable impacts to aquifers;
2) Prohibits new well permits in basins of critical overdraft and basins that are in probationary status;
3) Conditional use permit requirement would not apply to areas that have already adopted measures to protect aquifers; and
4) Small yield wells and replacement wells are exempted from the above requirements.

Background and Analysis
Across California, new well drillings have sharply increased during the drought, including in areas where aquifers are already at risk due to critical overdraft. Unmitigated, rapid groundwater withdrawals have the potential to cause aquifers to collapse with subsidence, or to draw in salt water near the coast, risking permanent damage to aquifers and to groundwater supplies for existing farmers and communities.

The impact on stressed aquifers is exacerbated by the growing trend of investor companies planting new crops in never-before irrigated, rangeland areas of the state. Almond tree plantings alone increased by 96,000 acres since June 2014, despite persistent and severe drought conditions throughout California. Already, in some communities, such as Paso Robles, residents must rely completely on trucked in water supplies due to groundwater levels falling below well levels.

As aquifers become susceptible to subsidence, state infrastructure is also at risk. NASA reports that parts of the California Aqueduct sank by over twelve inches in 2014. Continued subsidence poses similar costly risks to important local, state and federal infrastructure, including other aqueducts, bridges, roads, and flood structures. While groundwater levels continue to drop, California does not have a mechanism to slow the proliferation of new wells. Currently, counties have the responsibility and authority to issue well permits. However, well permits are often simple to obtain, and do not require analyses to prevent undesirable impacts or permanent damage to aquifers.

SB 1317 establishes a basic protection for California’s at risk aquifers, requiring each local government to condition new well permits to prevent undesirable impacts on the aquifer.
Support
The Nature Conservancy
Sierra Club
NRDC
Planning and Conservation League
Clean Water Action
Community Water Center
Leadership Counsel
Wholly H2O
Union of Concerned Scientists
CLCV
Lutheran Office of Public Policy California
Azul
Food and Water Watch
CalCAN

Opposition
League of California Cities
Rural County Representatives of California
California State Association of Counties
California Groundwater Association
California Dairies, Inc.
California Citrus Mutual
California Cotton Ginners and Growers Associations
Western Agricultural Processors Association
California Fresh Fruit Association
California Farm Bureau
California League of Food Processors
California Cattlemen's Association
CalChamber
Agricultural Council of California
Nisei Farmers League
Western Plan Health Association
Merced County
Western Growers
California Municipal Utilities Association
San Joaquin County
Desert Water Agency
Valley Ag Water Coalition
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