

CRESTON ADVISORY BODY

Meeting Minutes for Wednesday, May 20, 2026

Creston Community Center – 5110 Swayze St, Creston

Creston Advisory Body Contact – CrestonAB@gmail.com

Meetings scheduled on the 3rd Wednesday of each month except December.

Chairperson – Sheila Lyons Vice Chair – Kurt Almond Treasurer – Roy Barba Secretary/Recorder – rotating duty

1. Call to Order – Flag Salute

The meeting was called to order at **7:15 p.m.**

Members present were: **Sheila Lyons, Thomas Edel, Juan Soto, Kurt Almond, Matt Lynge & Michael Aarons.**

Absent Member(s): Don Clark, Roy Barba

2. CAB Recorder for This Meeting

Recorder designation for this meeting was: **Kurt Almond**

3. Minutes of Previous Meeting(s)

Review of the April 2026 CAB meeting minutes was conducted and unanimously approved.

4. Limited Public and/or CAB Member Comments for Items NOT on the agenda (3 min each)

a. Community Announcements

- **Rosie and Bruce Hebron** farewell celebration: June 1st, 6 PM at Community Center; Rosie instrumental in starting rodeo and securing Community Center lease, moving to Tennessee after 46 years.
- Palooza fundraiser event: May 30th at Community Center to keep pool open for summer swimming.
- Election Day polling: June 2nd at Creston Community Center.

Creston Road closure: Scheduled to begin June 1st and will last all summer until Labor Day.

b. Water Monitoring Update

- Creston Fire Station monitoring well: Water level stable at 15 feet below ground, unchanged over monitoring period
- Elkhorn area (barn ranch): Water levels dropped from 150-300 feet to 400-700 feet since 27 wells installed; four of five monitoring wells now dry, indicating expanding cone of depression.
- Regulatory compliance: After second year of declining levels, action should have been taken but hasn't occurred.

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c. PRAGA Fee Study Concerns

- Administrative cost allocation challenge: CAB identified that general planning and administrative costs are being charged to small residential landowners as de minimis septic users who contribute net-zero water consumption (all water returns to aquifer via septic)
- Supervisor action requested: Ask county why small landowners are charged administrative fees for managing something that doesn't require management from a de minimis user perspective

d. Chemical Dumping Follow-up: Thomas Edel

- County accepted company's documentation of dumped product without independent sampling; response deemed satisfactory by reporting resident despite different investigative standards than federal practice.

5. Public Safety – CAL FIRE, Sheriff, CHP, etc.

SLO County Sheriff's Department – Not Present

SLO County Fire / CAL FIRE- Station 50 – Not Present

California Highway Patrol (CHP) – Lt. Commander Darren Gennuso, Templeton Area Office:

- April enforcement statistics: 4 crashes investigated (2 property damage, 2 injuries), 27 enforcement contacts resulting in 18 citations (8 for speeding), 2 DUI arrests.
- Staffing additions: New 21-year-old officer from Central Valley completing 600-700 hour FTO period through end of July; new sergeant arriving in July to replace transferred officer.
- Patrol coverage: Officers conducting periodic speed enforcement details in Creston on Saturday mornings and afternoons.

Infrastructure and Road Concerns

- Bridge closure traffic impact: Heavy truck traffic during grape harvest will use alternate routes (Highway 41, Neil Springs, South Elk, Lamar, Cripple Creek) not designed for such loads; requested Public Works monitor road conditions and repair damage, flatten shoulders to prevent vehicles catching ruts when passing large trucks.
- Driveway sight line question: No clearance requirements exist for parking near driveways on state highways; new daylighting law applies only to intersections, not driveways.

6. Fifth (5th) District Supervisor Heather Moreno via Legislative Aid Jennifer Kinneer:

Supervisor **Heather Moreno** secured 4-1 Board support to create a one-mile buffer zone around Creston's Village Reserve Line prohibiting cannabis activities, with staff directed to prepare a zoning amendment for future consideration.

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- The CAB requested to review proposed language before final Board vote and confirmed the buffer would extend nearly to Highway 41 and Highway 229
- Cannabis buffer zone: Board of Supervisors approved directing staff to prepare one-mile buffer ordinance around Creston VRL, prohibiting outdoor cannabis grows and related activities.
- Laney Road vegetation encroachment: Growth from adjacent shrubs and oak trees forcing bicyclists into roadway on blind curves near Cass Winery; county representative to request clearance work (previously done successfully years ago).
- Jennifer: Monitor and request Public Works attention to alternate route road conditions during Creston Road closure, especially shoulder maintenance
- Supervisor Moreno: Investigate PRAGA administrative fee allocation and why small landowners are charged for general county planning costs.

7. New Business - Paso Robles Groundwater Basin – PRAGA release of Draft Rate and Fee Study Report ZOOM appearance by Blaine Reely

Key Outcomes

The Creston Advisory Body held a contentious discussion with San Luis Obispo County Groundwater Sustainability Director Blaine Reilly and PRAGA Executive Director Taylor Blakeslee regarding the proposed Proposition 26 groundwater fee assessment. Community members expressed strong opposition to the fee structure, arguing it constitutes an unfair administrative tax with no direct property benefits, while county representatives defended it as necessary for SGMA compliance.

Groundwater Fees Discussion

CAB raised concerns from constituents about the proposed groundwater fees, including arguments that de minimis users with negligible impact should be exempt and that the fees violate Proposition 26 requirements. Blaine clarified that the current fee assessment under Prop 26 would only be valid for one year and would need to be renewed annually through a new Prop 26 process, which involves significant effort and costs. Taylor confirmed that de minimis users using less than two acre-feet per year for domestic purposes should not be assessed fees according to the rate study and board recommendations. It should be noted that Prop 26 fee assessments cannot be used for projects but can only be used for administrative tasks.

De Minimis User Fee Policy

Taylor explained that the Praga board has decided not to directly charge de minimis users, addressing concerns about how to handle the small benefits all groundwater users receive in the basin. CAB questioned why non-de minimis users are being charged fees when they're not receiving direct benefits from the program, arguing that these costs should be covered by the county's general fund rather than landowners. Taylor clarified that while the program does provide some benefits to all groundwater users,

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de minimis users are not being directly charged but rather included through proportional calculations, with any fees covered by member agencies.

SGMA Compliance Funding Discussion

Blaine explained that SGMA is a legal requirement for the Paso Robles groundwater basin, which requires ongoing compliance efforts including monitoring, reporting, and plan implementation over a 20-year period. CAB argued that the focus should be on actual water savings rather than administrative reports, and compared the situation to an unfair tax on local landowners for benefits received by out-of-area users. Blaine maintained that the costs should be shared by groundwater users within the basin, while CAB requested that the county find a more equitable way to fund SGMA compliance that doesn't burden local landowners.

Groundwater Sustainability Agency Compliance Discussion

Blaine explained that the board must comply with SGMA requirements and distribute costs equitably among water users, while CAB and others argued that the current approach disproportionately affects landowners with beneficial water rights rather than addressing actual overdraft issues. Greg provided detailed technical criticism of the basin's classification, questioning the critical overdraft designation and challenging the methodology used to calculate water extraction versus evaporation. The discussion highlighted ongoing concerns about representation and decision-making authority in the groundwater sustainability agency, with participants noting that affected landowners feel underrepresented in current governance structures.

Water Management Progress Challenges

Murray Powell expressed frustration with the lack of progress on water issues since 2019, noting that despite millions spent on studies, no meaningful water savings have been achieved. He criticized the current GSA structure and proposed that either the GSAs take more responsibility for implementing solutions or the DWR should take over. The discussion concluded with a question about planned projects benefiting the basin and landowners over the next five years, though no specific answers were provided in the transcript.

Wine Grape Industry Groundwater Challenges

Blaine discussed the current situation in the wine grape industry, which is the largest user of groundwater in the basin, using approximately 90% of the extracted groundwater. He explained that due to changing economics, there is a retraction of irrigated agriculture, with nearly 2,000 acres of fallowed land registered so far in the Fowler Land Registry platform, potentially growing to 8,000-10,000 acres. Blaine said downturn in wine industry and resulting fallowing of land could potentially solve the problem of balancing the Basin. Blaine also mentioned plans to position the basin to secure Prop 4 grant funding for groundwater recharge projects, particularly flood managed aquifer recharge features, expected to become available in 2028.

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Groundwater Sustainability Plan Management Actions

Blaine and CAB discussed management actions in the Groundwater Sustainability Plan, with CAB emphasizing the need for voluntary fallowing and stormwater capture projects. Blaine explained that while mandatory pumping limitations are allowed under SGMA, they hope to achieve sustainability through voluntary means, including flood water recharge and exploring supplemental water sources. Taylor acknowledged concerns about implementation but noted that Paso Robles was listed as critically over drafted, requiring compliance with regulations, and emphasized that the basin needs updated monitoring data to better understand current conditions.

Basin Water Management Challenges

CAB expressed frustration about ongoing water management issues in the basin, stating that residents have been hearing similar discussions for 15 years without meaningful progress. He called for concrete management plans and strategies rather than continued studies, emphasizing the need to treat water management like a business rather than a government agency. Taylor acknowledged the frustrations and committed to bringing in stakeholders for future planning processes, while Blaine explained that current ET data shows lower water use than sustainable yield, though longer-term data would be needed for full assessment. The meeting also covered technical issues with water rate calculations and concerns about the accuracy of ET measurements for determining water usage.

Primary Community Concerns Raised

De Minimis User Exemptions

- Residents argued de minimis users (under 2 acre-feet/year) create net-zero basin impact through septic systems and should be fully exempted
- PRAGA confirmed de minimis users won't be charged directly, but their proportional consumptive use will be covered by member agencies through contributions or in-kind services
- Questions remain about duration of exemption protection beyond the one-year Prop 26 cycle

Legal and Constitutional Challenges

- Community members cited California Water Code Section 10730, arguing PRAGA cannot impose fees on de minimis users unless specifically regulated
- Concerns raised that fees violate Proposition 26 requirements for "fair and reasonable relationship" between fees and burden/benefit received
- Basin's "critical overdraft" designation questioned, with claims it was chosen primarily for grant eligibility rather than technical necessity

Lack of Tangible Projects

- Budget allocates \$988,000 to program administration versus only \$7,000 to management actions

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- Community members emphasized 15+ years of studies with no measurable water savings achieved.
- Attendees argued costs should be funded through county general funds rather than property tax assessments.

County/PRAGA Responses

SGMA Compliance Requirements

- SGMA enacted in 2014 legally mandates groundwater sustainability plan development and implementation for high-priority basins.
- Paso Robles Basin designated as high priority and critical overdraft, requiring 20-year timeline to achieve sustainability.
- Annual reports, five-year comprehensive GSP evaluations, and continuous monitoring of seven sustainability criteria are mandatory and expensive.

Fee Structure and Duration

- Prop 26 fees apply for one year only; any subsequent year requires new Prop 26 process including updated rate study.
- Fees cannot appear on tax rolls beyond the approved one-year period without repeating full assessment process.
- De minimis users excluded from fee list using county residential use codes, with appeals process available for incorrect classifications.

Current Basin Conditions

- Economic downturn in wine grape industry driving voluntary fallowing of irrigated agriculture.
- Fallowed Land Registry deployed April 1st has registered nearly 2,000 acres, with projections of 8,000-10,000 acres total.
- 8,000-10,000 acres of fallowed land would effectively bring basin into balance.

Technical Disputes

Evapotranspiration (ET) Measurement Accuracy

- Community members challenged ET-based water use calculations as unreliable estimates rather than actual extraction measurements.
- Concerns raised that ET cannot distinguish between groundwater extraction, riparian wells, surface water, or pond evaporation.

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- County defended ET as adequate for estimating consumptive use, though acknowledged increased uncertainty when back-calculating actual extraction volumes.

Basin Overdraft Status

- 2025 annual report shows consumptive use of 50,363 acre-feet versus sustainable yield of 61,100 acre-feet.
- Community argued basin is not currently in overdraft and "critical" designation lacks technical support.
- County emphasized need for consecutive years of reduced use to establish true sustainability, not single-year snapshots.

Proposed Management Actions

Near-Term Initiatives

- Positioning basin to apply for Proposition 4 grant funding (available ~2028) for flood-managed aquifer recharge (Flood MARS) projects.
- Economic-driven voluntary fallowing through Fallowed Land Registry providing Williamson Act and Ag Offset Ordinance protections.
- Expanding monitoring network with additional wells, stream gauges, and climatologic stations.

Unimplemented GSP Components

- Groundwater Sustainability Plan identified stormwater capture as third priority action, but no projects implemented.
- Voluntary fallowing was fourth priority, mandatory pumping limitations in problem areas (Elkhorn/Harlem with 27 replaced wells, 300-foot water level drops) was fifth priority.
- Vegetation management along Salinas River (arundo, trees) not included in current management actions despite significant consumptive use.

Governance and Transparency Issues

Representation Concerns

- Community members stated rural residents were refused seats on planning committees and lack direct representation.
- PRAGA board composed of water districts and agencies; no GSA meeting held in three years.
- Proposed advisory committee of five individuals (dry well owner, rancher, small ag, large ag, de minimis user) will have voice but no voting power.

Administrative Cost Allocation

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- Appeals process for fee assessment managed by LandIQ and SCI Consulting—the same entities that generated the water use data and rate study.
 - Grant fund expenditure questions raised regarding \$600,000+ spent on Prop 218 process and \$75,000 for legal counsel, potentially violating eligible use restrictions.
 - Retroactive billing concern: using October 2024-September 2025 water year data for fiscal year 2026-27 property tax bills creates one-year lag and complications for land lease situations.
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8. Planning Department

No representative was present from Planning Department.

9. Unfinished Business

- Matt Lynge is resigning from Highway 58 area seat (District 5) due to out-of-state move; position now vacant.
 - Approved expenditure under \$100 for plaque and banner honoring Rosie's community service at June 1st celebration
 - Next meeting: June 17th
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10. Committee Reports and Administrative and Technology Matters

U.S. Postal Service Postmark Policy Change (Effective December 2024)

- Mail now postmarked based on processing date at postal facility, not deposit date.
- Payments or ballots deposited close to deadlines may receive late postmarks even if placed in mailbox before deadline.
- Recommendation: Request manual postmark inside post office for time-sensitive mail, or use designated ballot drop boxes at community center for elections.

Problems in meeting A/V equipment

Problems were encountered in two way communication on Zoom. Mike Aarons will review possible equipment changes.

- Investigate and recommend upgrades to meeting audio/visual equipment (e.g., mixer, camera, microphones) to improve hybrid/Zoom meeting functionality for future public meetings.
- Research and, if feasible, implement improved camera/microphone setup for hybrid meetings, including the ability to select active microphones and switch between room and speaker views.

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11. Financial Report

- Treasurer's report: Current balance \$2,415.06 after receiving \$1,400 county funding.
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12. Additional Limited Public Comments

None.

13. Adjournment

The meeting concluded at 9:16 PM with confirmation of the next regularly scheduled meeting on **June 17, 2026**.