Hidden beneath the surface, groundwater’s depletion is not readily apparent and is easy to ignore in wet times. But in a drought, when as much as 60% of the state’s total water supply depends upon it, severely depleted groundwater becomes a crisis within a crisis.

Even as California’s drought began in 2011, many of the state’s aquifers were already significantly depleted, due in great part to the fact that California remained the only western state not to regulate its groundwater supply. The more dramatic results of this failing, apparent well before the drought began, were land subsidence—literally, the land’s collapse, sometimes by as much as 30 feet—leading to the destruction of roads and other infrastructure, as well as seawater intrusion into vital freshwater sources along the state’s Central Coast.

Because it was already apparent to water insiders, before the drought set in, that changing the way California managed its groundwater was crucial, when Resources Legacy Fund created the California Water Foundation, groundwater reform was key to its overarching goal of achieving sustainable water management in the state. By the time the drought became serious enough to get Californians and their leaders to wake up and take notice, the Water Foundation was ready to act.

From the very beginning, the Water Foundation saw the need to form relationships with the water agency community, including the Association of California Water Agencies, creating the basis for a powerful coalition with a sector not known traditionally as a hotbed of support for groundwater regulation.

In addition, understanding that weak political strategies had undermined attempts to establish groundwater regulation in the past, the Water Foundation assembled leading strategists to join the effort, crafting a far more calculated plan, targeting specific political leaders and the Brown Administration with the intent of developing additional champions and a larger coalition. The sponsorship of timely conferences and the assembly of a coalition of Central Valley water agencies added to the momentum. Broadening overall reach, including ever more voices through public meetings, the message began to be carried by key players throughout the agricultural community, local governments, environmental interests, and a host of other crucial stakeholder groups. A wave of support began to swell.
A direct outcome of the Water Foundation’s outreach was its formal report to the governor and legislature—*Recommendations for Sustainable Groundwater Management*—delivered in early 2014. Its crucial content was favorably received due to the many and unusually diverse set of interests it represented and the increasingly undeniable need for immediate reform.

As momentum grew, the Water Foundation launched the Groundwater Voices Coalition website featuring messages and sentiments of many high-profile figures from across a broad spectrum of interests. The public began to take notice. An encouraging summer 2014 poll indicated that almost 80% of Californians were in favor of groundwater reform. The Water Foundation engaged and directed media experts and lobbyists who built a campaign around evolving legislation based upon the Water Foundation’s recommendations, mirrored by those put forward by the Association of California Water Agencies.

Through the dry summer of 2014, negotiators worked to craft a systematic and effective policy, appealing to the broadest range of support. Continually building the list of supporters right up the very last minutes preceding the vote, the Water Foundation appealed to a significant array of water agencies, agricultural interests, business interests, labor unions, environmental and environmental justice groups, tribes and others who might help.

The September of 2014 passage of California’s first comprehensive groundwater management policy was as historic as the drought which helped make it possible, especially in a state known as the place where “whisky is for drinking and water is for fighting.” With time, it can make groundwater the centerpiece of sustainable water in California, by providing a highly flexible water supply—storing water in wet years and responding to increased demand in drought.

Helping many voices speak as one, fostering unorthodox relationships and innovative solutions, persevering until the goal is attained. These are hallmarks of the Water Foundation—and Resources Legacy Fund—approach. Through this approach and the work of all who stood with the Water Foundation on the groundwater effort, tomorrow still holds the promise of a brighter day for California.