



Assemblymember Lori Wilson along with UCLA Law students Adrienne Davies, Owen McAleer and Gabi Rosenfeld testifying at an assembly committee hearing.

Earlier this week the San Francisco Chronicle [declared](#) that California’s legislative session would close with just a single bill addressing injustices in the state’s water rights system. Now you can add one more to the list.

Gov. Newsom signed Assembly Bill 779 into law this week. It’s an important step to reforming the state’s murky—often unfair—groundwater adjudication process of settling disputes over water rights.

AB 779 by Assemblymember Lori Wilson aims to level the playing field for small water users and disadvantaged communities, including small farmers and farmers of color. UCLA Law students Adrienne Davies, Owen McAleer and Gabi Rosenfeld helped write the bill as part of the [UCLA School of Law’s California Environmental Legislation and Policy Clinic](#), and they’ve written about it [here](#) and [here](#). The three students went up to Sacramento to [testify](#) before more than one committee hearing during this legislative session.

Going forward, this will change the adjudication process in ways that benefit smaller parties. Courts will need to consider “the water use of and accessibility of water for small

farmers and disadvantaged communities” while making a judgement. The groundwater sustainability agency (GSA) in a given basin will receive all pleading and briefing materials from involved parties. The new law will allow the court to refer groundwater adjudications to the State Water Resources Control Board, helping courts to better scientifically understand groundwater use in a basin. Because adjudications can go on for years, there will now be precautionary measures to prevent the over-pumping of groundwater while the parties await an adjudication ruling.

California has, as Richard Frank [puts it](#), “one of the most antiquated and outdated water rights systems of any Western state.” That’s why it’s important that the governor signed SB 389 by Sen. Ben Allen, which looks to put to rest any ambiguity regarding the Water Board’s power to require water users to verify their water rights claims.

As we’ve seen in the [water fight going on right now in California’s Cuyama Valley](#), there’s more work to do to strengthen the state’s groundwater management for the era of climate change. In Cuyama, two big corporate growers initiated a groundwater adjudication that has all the basin’s water users—even the school district—scrambling to get representation to defend their water rights. Smaller farmers and residents have launched a carrot boycott against those two corporate growers, alleging they’re over pumping.

The passage of AB 779 means that in the future small farmers and other parties will have more information at their disposal during these types of groundwater adjudications. And underrepresented communities in California will be better informed about their need to assert their rights at the outset.