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Jennifer Buckman, Doug Coty, Holly Jacobson, Morgan Biggerstaff, Ryan Bezerra, Gavin Ralphs, Joshua Horowitz, Zach Castagnola-Johnson and Kristin Peer.

For more than 30 years, Sacramento-based BKS Law Firm has carved out a unique niche in California's legal landscape, representing public agencies in the complex and increasingly critical field of water and wastewater law. Founded in 1989 on the principle of serving public entities, the firm has grown into a powerhouse of specialized expertise, nearly doubling in size over the past 18 months.

"We primarily represent public agencies, and a lot of that is representing agencies that deliver water or treat wastewater," said partner Ryan Bezerra. "It's turned out to be a fabulous business model. I think we all find it very meaningful. Perhaps, most importantly, you feel like you're doing something good in the world by helping serve the public in delivering essential services."

The firm's practice encompasses two main components: a general counsel side handling routine public agency matters like construction contracts and public meetings, and a resources group focusing on water rights, environmental issues and groundwater litigation. While BKS Law Firm maintains its primary office in Sacramento near the State Water Resources Control Board, the firm's specialized expertise draws clients from

across California, from Santa Barbara to the Central Valley and the Bay Area.

"We're so specialized in what we do that we get calls from all over the state," said partner Jennifer Buckman. "Most of the water firms are located in Sacramento because that's where the state water board is, but we tend to practice throughout the state."

Several factors have fueled the firm's recent growth and expanding caseload. The passage of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act in 2014, which Bezerra helped draft, created an entirely new practice area. The legislation aims to bring all groundwater basins to sustainable operation levels by 2040, a goal that has generated significant controversy and complex legal work, particularly in the Central Valley where agricultural economies were built on groundwater overdraft.

"Groundwater management is probably the single biggest issue in the Central Valley and the single most pressing one in our business statewide right now," Bezerra said.

The creation of the State Water Board's administrative hearings office approximately five years ago has also generated substantial work. "That's resulted in several pretty complex and high-profile water rights hearings,"

said partner Kristin Peer, who helped write the legislation creating the office. These administrative proceedings function like trials, with evidence development and witness cross-examination before specialized administrative law judges who must have years of water law experience.

The firm's litigation practice differs markedly from traditional civil litigation. Many cases are decided on administrative records rather than traditional discovery. However, BKS Law also handles massive groundwater adjudications involving hundreds of parties. Bezerra and partner Holly Jacobson recently completed phase one of a trial in the Oxnard and Pleasant Valley adjudication, which included seven or eight technical experts and approximately 25 attorneys in the courtroom on any given day.

The firm expects to play a significant role in what Bezerra called "the biggest water law case in the state of California in at least 45 years, Bring Back the Kern v. City of Bakersfield, now pending before the California Supreme Court. The case addresses whether environmental uses of water are subject to reasonable use requirements, an issue that "could apply to every stream in the state," according to Bezerra. While not representing a party

directly, BKS Law expects to submit an amicus brief in the landmark case.

Beyond traditional water rights work, the firm has developed expertise in cutting-edge water supply solutions, including injecting water into groundwater storage, groundwater desalination and expanded recycled water uses. Partner Douglas Coty noted the firm's work on major infrastructure projects, inclu-

ding helping Contra Costa Water District plan for a \$3 billion project to replace 48 miles of open canal with buried pipelines over the next 25 years.

The firm has also developed an unusual specialty: representing most of California's mosquito and vector control districts. "When you think about it, what breeds mosquitoes? Standing water," Buckman explained. "So that's the other

funny little specialty that we have going on."

The firm's attorneys remain actively involved in shaping water policy at both state and federal levels. "We're not just passive recipients of new laws and new regulations," Bezerra said. "We're quite active in the State Water Board's development of regulations dealing with water rights in particular, and we're also pretty active on legislative issues."

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