

EDITORIAL California must address groundwater pumping

BY THE BEE EDITORIAL BOARD

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Taking more water out of groundwater basins than goes in pits neighbor against neighbor in the San Joaquin Valley and in some coastal and Southern California areas. Farmers and residents see their wells going dry and, with land subsidence, some canals running backwards.

The situation now is so dire that even longstanding groundwater regulation skeptics have come to the table.

For the first time the governor, legislators, farmers, water districts, environmentalists and others are speaking the same language. All agree that California has to better manage groundwater resources, that we have to control pumping and levy fees to finance replenishment — and that if the locals won't do it the state should step in.

California is the only state in the western United States that does not govern its groundwater at the state level. We have a patchwork of local and regional management, and some parts of the state do better than others. Most urban areas manage their groundwater wisely, but in the Central Valley there is little restriction on pumping.

Orange County has had a groundwater basin district since 1933, after court action and a special act of the Legislature, and the power to impose pumping taxes since 1953 to finance replenishment of the groundwater basin. That water district has maintained the groundwater basin at safe levels. That model should expand statewide.

On April 7, the Association of California Water Agencies — with 440 water agencies accounting for 90% of water deliveries to cities, farms and businesses in the state — put forward recommendations that make sense.

Legislation also should deal with a major cause of the alarming drop in groundwater levels: a big expansion of land coming under irrigation for permanent crops such as almonds. In the San Joaquin Valley, fruit and nut crops increased by 386,000 acres and field crops increased by 72,000 acres between 2007 and 2012, according to Jeff Michael at the University of the Pacific. Vegetable crops decreased by 72,000 acres.

As Michael points out, many people questioned the sustainability of having more than 5.4 million irrigated acres in the Valley in 2007 before 386,000 more acres were brought into production.

Both he and Sargeant Green of Fresno State's California Water Institute have suggested that those seeking to change open land to irrigated should be required to get conditional land-use permits, showing that groundwater extraction rates would not adversely impact others. They're right.

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