

Report on sinking groundwater makes statewide case for new rules

[fb fresnobee.com/2014/05/06/3912654/report-on-sinking-groundwater.html](http://fresnobee.com/2014/05/06/3912654/report-on-sinking-groundwater.html)



A lone branch sticks out of the dirt at San Luis Reservoir, showing how low the lake was last June. The drought may hit harder this year.

MARK CROSSE — Fresno Bee Staff Photo [Buy Photo](#)

A [new state report](#) last week revealed alarming declines of the underground water table all through California -- the biggest losses clearly in the southern San Joaquin Valley.

That's important news, though not terribly surprising. The real headline here is not in the maps, charts and graphs.

Groundwater rules are on the way, and this report from the state Department of Water Resources is part of the mounting justification.

Two new bills are already working their way through the Legislature. Long-dreaded government rules for protecting the state's groundwater seem quite possible after the driest winter in decades.

Since nearly 60% of the state's groundwater pumping is done in the Valley -- more than 9 million acre-feet a year -- people here need to pay attention.

Why is new regulation dreaded? Farmers tell me it's another expense for an industry already dealing with recent irrigation and air quality rules.

Farm leaders also talk about a distrust of government. How can someone in Sacramento know what's best for a farm in Fresno, Kings, Tulare or Kern counties?

At the same time, nobody argues that overdrafting groundwater hurts.

Costs rise as wells are drilled deeper. Neighboring wells go dry. More contamination is sucked into drinking water. Land actually sinks, damaging canals, dams and even roads. Lawsuits are filed, and court battles sometimes last years.

A retreating groundwater level during a monster drought is a pretty big worry, too. When it affects a broad swath of the state, as it has, a lot more people get interested in groundwater rules.

[My story](#) on Tuesday was about a recommendation for groundwater rules. It came from the independent, nonprofit [California Water Foundation](#), which recommends local control backed up by state authority.

Exactly how will that look?

That's where the political process is right now with [SB 1168](#) from Sen. Fran Pavley, D-Agoura Hills, and [AB 1739](#) from Assembly Member Roger Dickinson, D-Sacramento.