

Editorial: It's high time California manages its underground water sources

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By the Editorial Board

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According to Michelle Sneed, USGS Hydrologist, the buckling of concrete panels along the Delta-Mendota Canal is evidence of the land sinking due to over pumping of groundwater South of Los Banos.

This has to be the year that California finally starts to regulate groundwater. It has to be.

Not since the drought of 1977 have water resources been in such dire straits. To cope, the state is taking drastic steps when it comes to surface water. Last week, the State Water Resources Control Board ordered more than 4,200 “junior” water rights holders in the Sacramento and San Joaquin watersheds to [stop pumping water from streams](#) and warned that, if things got worse, “senior” water rights holders might see restrictions as well.

This move will only put more pressure on farmers and water districts to turn to groundwater – a practice that has already had dramatic, and disturbing, results.

Wells have run dry; overdrafting of groundwater has caused the land to sink – up to 28 feet in some places in the Valley; and aquifers aren't getting recharged.

There's little the state can do, as California is the only dry western state that doesn't have a comprehensive groundwater-management plan.

That must change. And as the drought gets worse, it pits people against one another, especially when a few exploit the water for their own profit.

That's what happened last month in Merced County, where a deal between two landowners to [sell millions of dollars worth of groundwater](#) from their wells to an out-of-county water district erupted in outrage at a county Board of Supervisors meeting. The board got wind of the deal only because the transfer of water requires using waterways managed by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, and it requires a public comment period.

Merced County does not have any rules to stop the two landowners from “groundwater mining,” or selling water pumped from their wells to buyers far away – in this case to the Del Puerto Water District representing mostly Stanislaus County farmers. All the board could do was send a letter in opposition.

Groundwater mining isn't new, and has been roiling agricultural communities for years. But in a severe drought, this kind of commercialization of groundwater isn't just unseemly, it's reckless.



State water officials prefer that locals manage their own groundwater basins, and many already do. But the Merced story shows holes in the patchwork of state water regulation.

It seems like things are finally moving in the right direction. Sen. Fran Pavley, D-Agoura Hills, has legislation, [Senate Bill 1168](#), to require local agencies to develop groundwater-management plans. There are other bills regarding groundwater management as well. The governor has also included nearly \$5 million in his proposed 2014-15 budget for the Department of Water Resources to monitor groundwater levels and to step in when local or regional agencies fail to police their own groundwater basins.

Virtually everyone agrees that the state must manage its groundwater better. It's high time to make that happen.

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