

EDITORIAL: Secrecy shrouding well-drilling data must end

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By The Bee Editorial Board



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California is the only state in the western United States that does not regulate groundwater at the state level.

Worse, as Sacramento Bee reporter Tom Knudson pointed out in a Sunday story, "as drought persists, frustration mounts over secrecy of California's well drilling logs."

The state also is unique in the West with a wrongheaded, outdated 1951 law that makes well logs and drillers' reports confidential information and not available to the public.

That makes real groundwater management impossible.

All other western states make well logs open to the public, many on the Internet. California should do the same.

Sen. Fran Pavley of Agoura Hills introduced legislation, Senate Bill 263, in 2011 that would have made the information available to university researchers and other groundwater professionals, but it got so watered down that Gov. Jerry Brown vetoed it.

Pavley came back in 2012 with Senate Bill 1146 to grant full public access to well logs. It failed.

During the current drought, with reports of severe overdrafting of groundwater, Pavley, Assembly Member Roger Dickinson of Sacramento and the Governor's Office have committed to work together to produce a groundwater management bill by August.

They are working through issues that have been contentious since the drought of 1976-77, such as requiring local entities to develop groundwater management plans and, if they fail to do so, having the state step in.

But, to date, the Dickinson and Pavley bills do not mention repeal or amendment of Water Code Section 13752, the statute that prohibits public disclosure of well logs.

A working group is scheduled to meet in the Governor's Office today. Public disclosure should come up, and it should be included in the legislation.

The timing is right. The California Groundwater Association, which represents well drillers and opposed disclosure in the past, has shifted. "By and large, we are much more amenable to making them (well logs) available," executive director John Hofer told Knudson.

That should include public reporting on actual pumping from individual groundwater wells, which is needed to manage any groundwater basin.

Opponents fear, rightly, that transparency would raise questions about who's pumping how much and where.

That would be the point: Public disclosure is key to real groundwater management.

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