

EDITORIAL: California must manage and protect groundwater

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By The Bee Editorial Board

In the quest for water during a drought of historic proportions, water districts and farmers are drilling more wells and pumping record amounts of groundwater in California.

Wells are going dry and land is subsiding. Roads, canals and aqueducts are damaged as a result.

In a normal year, one-third of the water we use is pumped from the ground. In most droughts, that amount rises to about half. This year, with allocations of water severely cut, groundwater may account for as much as 65% of the water we consume.

Yet there is very little oversight of how we use groundwater. There are no requirements to keep track of it, no limitations on how much water can be pumped out of the ground, and no safeguards from depleting this resource.

Feel free to shake your head in disbelief. But California is the only state that does not have a statewide system to manage its groundwater, which provides a critical buffer for farmers during drought and is essential to California's \$45 billion agriculture industry.

As lawmakers return this week, they will consider legislation that would establish a framework to protect and manage groundwater through local agencies, while respecting property and water rights.

Senate Bill 1168 by Sen. Fran Pavley, D-Agoura Hills, and Assembly Bill 1739 by Assembly Member Roger Dickinson, D-Sacramento, would provide a broad assessment of the more than 400 water basins, and authorize water agencies and districts to adopt sustainable management plans.

Under the legislation, local agencies would have to create and approve the plans through a stakeholder process.

Officials who oversee about 125 water basins representing about 90% of all groundwater pumping would need to develop a sustainability plan by 2020.

We all know the right to water is worth a good fight in California. But common sense needs to be applied, too. The Legislature and the governor cannot wait any longer. Evidence of why not is right before our eyes.

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