

Report: California drought threatens groundwater

The Associated Press

Three years of drought have taken a heavy toll on California groundwater supplies, with hundreds more wells being dug this year, one of the driest on record, a state report released Tuesday said.

Over 350 new wells were dug in both of the agriculturally rich Fresno and Tulare counties, more than any other part the state, the California Department of Water Resources reported. Hundreds more wells were drilled in Merced, Butte, Kern, Kings, Shasta and Stanislaus counties, the report says.

Gov. Jerry Brown this year initiated new laws to start managing underground water in California, the last Western state to take such steps. But the plans could take years to be developed, officials said.

"If we fail to manage our groundwater basins sustainably, we risk losing the water supply savings account that can help cities, farms and businesses surviving drought with minimal disruption," said Mark Cowin, director of the Water Resources department.

California risks overdraft, which Cowin said could permanently damage the naturally occurring underground water for future generations. In years of normal rain and snowfall, groundwater accounts for 40 percent of supplies for farmers and communities, and the report says that in times of drought that increases to 60 percent.

Yet the report says that about one-fourth of the state's 127 most heavily used underground water basins are not adequately monitored. Basins with notable decreases are in the Sacramento River, San Joaquin River, Tulare Lake, San Francisco Bay, Central and South Coast regions, the report says.

Excessive ground-water pumping, the report says, will continue to cause the ground levels to drop, a phenomenon called land subsidence.