

# Feds should take over protecting groundwater

By Dana Stotsky and David Reed Special to The Bee

California has lost control of its quickly diminishing water. While state officials lose no opportunity to tout California's environmental leadership to the world and to plead with residents to conserve water, regulators have allowed oil companies to dump billions of gallons of toxic wastewater each year into protected underground drinking water.

This water contains known carcinogens, including benzene and hexavalent chromium, in concentrations sometimes hundreds of times above federal limits. In other cases, the oil industry has left polluted water in exposed, unlined pits near rows of crops. Farmers are worried since they feed the nation. Residents are worried since they drink the water. And if you eat lettuce, almonds, peaches or pistachios or enjoy a glass of California cabernet, it should have you worried, too.

Recent revelations show state officials allowed oil companies to operate 2,400 illegal injection wells to dispose of wastewater or use enhanced oil recovery techniques in protected aquifers. A separate set of disclosures show that more than one-third of the region's active disposal pits are operating without permission. Last week – after journalists uncovered a series of these troubling violations of state and federal regulations – [state senators took the department in charge of monitoring water to task](#) and called for a “culture change” in Sacramento. The head of the Department of Conservation admitted: “We all fell down.”

The situation is so grave that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is considering revoking California's primacy, which would mean the federal government, not Gov. Jerry Brown, would enforce key environmental laws. California's key regulators recently admitted in a letter to the federal EPA that they cannot ensure public health and safety, nor protection of groundwater.

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Groundwater is a critical part of California's water supply. According to the California Water Foundation, it meets about 40 percent of the state's water demand in an average year and as much as 60 percent or more during droughts.

The oil and gas industry's refusal to properly dispose of its waste – and state regulators' inability to do their job – threatens some of the nation's most fertile farmlands and could result in disastrous public costs. The state's current plan allows the oil industry to continue injecting waste into wells for at least the next six months, regardless of location or aquifer condition. In many cases, the industry will have as long as two years to stop illegal injections – once they are identified. Months or years of continued injection could do untold damage to California's aquifers.



The state's regulators have broken their public service covenant and must be held accountable. It is time for the U.S. EPA to take control – and for Californians to demand immediate actions from their state regulators and leaders.

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