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July 14, 2003

Water in peril: A special News-Sentinel report

By [News-Sentinel Staff](#)

We water our roses, fill our coffee cups, take our showers, and don't think much about it.

Water is life.

But in the Lodi area, our water supply is in danger.

In a special series starting today, we examine a slow-motion crisis that threatens our quality of life, our economy, our future.

Index of stories

[Lodi's groundwater supply steadily dropping](#)

[Water worry: Where is that salt coming from?](#)

[Kern County knows groundwater banking](#)

[Water table levels in downtown Lodi: 1927-2002](#)

[Map: Groundwater supply in peril](#)

Consider:

Though the Mokelumne River flows past our community, much of the river's flows are captured in the foothills and sent to the East Bay.

So Lodi's homes and businesses have long relied on

groundwater. But that unseen basin has dropped steadily over the years. Little has been done to replenish it. If it continues to drop, costs of pumping will continue to rise and quality, some experts say, will drop. A potential threat: salty water from the west, probably rising from ancient marine layers, could eventually invade our water supply.

Adding to the pressure on our groundwater has been a switch among growers to drip irrigation. It's a more measured and precise way of watering crops, but it does not replenish the groundwater basin as flood irrigation did.

Meanwhile, Lodi has closed some wells and is filtering others after the discovery of contaminants, including DBCP, a pesticide, and PCE and TCE, industrial solvents. The city is engaged in a long and bitter lawsuit in hopes of getting insurance companies to pay for a clean-up of TCE and PCE in the midtown area of Lodi.

While water pressures grow, so does the impetus to install and use water meters. That could cut down usage, but add a hefty expense to the city and to water customers.

As Mark Twain quipped, "whiskey is for drinking and water is for fighting over." That's especially true in San Joaquin County, where legal and political water skirmishes have been the norm, not the exception. When it comes to water, the county speaks with many strident voices: urban and rural, surface water and groundwater, Delta interests and inland interests, local agencies and regional. It takes money to pay for water projects, big money. But San Joaquin County, to date, has lacked the financial and political cohesion that could make regional projects possible.

There is hope.

Some efforts are planned or underway to try and recharge the water basin. Included is a proposal by the North San Joaquin Water Conservation District to levy a modest tax that would collect money for recharge projects. If the tax passes and the projects are successful, more ambitious efforts to revive our sinking groundwater basin are likely.

In Kern County, farmers and water managers are making money and refilling their groundwater at the same time through a so-called water banking agreement. We might be able to do the same here. A groundwater banking deal with East Bay Municipal Utility District, put on ice because of political and legal concerns, may yet be revived.

The city of Lodi recently agreed to purchase surface water from the Woodbridge Irrigation District. That deal is not without critics who feel the city is paying too dear a price. Yet the deal will provide a dose of water to supplement Lodi's supply -- or to help with the recharge of the basin.

More distant is a chance to take Sacramento River water and run it through a proposed pipeline to San Joaquin County for groundwater recharge.

So the future of water in the Lodi area is clouded.

One thing, though, is clear: water issues are moving from troublesome to critical.

"For years, we thought we would always have a huge and clean supply of water," said George Barber, water authority and former San Joaquin County Supervisor.

"But that's obviously not the case anymore. We need to face reality."

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