

Editorial: Enough for all?

County must confront groundwater limits

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Not so long ago, it seemed as if Sacramento County had a solid plan to supply water for all the growth it has planned south of the American River. Now, that plan is beginning to feel more like a game of dominoes.

As Tom Philp details in today's Forum section, old water certainties are beginning to wobble. Developers of a huge project south of Mather Field known as SunRidge, some 10,000 homes, have had to rejigger their water plan. Following the custom in the south county, the original plan was to drill wells directly underneath the development and supply residents with groundwater. But because of a plume of toxins underneath the Aerojet rocket testing facility to the east, that option won't work. So now the idea is to drill wells several miles away to the west, in a community known as North Vineyards, and import the water.

Another domino is Aerojet itself. It wants to build thousands of homes on some of its property. Where will this water come from?

Still another domino is in Rancho Cordova, where a dozen wells have been knocked out of service because of Aerojet's expanding plume of toxins. Where will the replacement water come for these residents and businesses? Sacramento County also has lost some nearby wells. Again, where is the replacement water?

Then there's the Cosumnes River. This waterway was all but forgotten in water planning for the south county. The engineers, and even local environmentalists, assumed that pumping more groundwater in places such as Elk Grove and North Vineyards wouldn't hurt the river.

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But is this true? Some University of California, Davis, experts have reviewed the science behind the county's water plan. They worry that more pumping may suck water from the Cosumnes at key stretches where the flow can be barely enough to allow salmon in the fall to swim upstream. If additional studies find this to be true, this would provide the legal weapon to curtail the pumping.

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Doesn't it behoove the county to confront this sooner rather than later? No, says the county's plan. The staff is proposing to supervisors that they look into these questions about the Cosumnes only after the SunRidge development, and its remote groundwater pumping facilities, are considered. And instead of setting aside adequate water to replace all the capacity lost from the wells knocked out of service due to the contamination from Aerojet, they propose to deal with one need at a time.

Under that philosophy, the first dominoes are OK. But when this game ends, where will the water come from? "If" is not a word that belongs in a water plan.

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