

Opinion: Groundwater needs to be part of state water discussions

Publisher's note: *This editorial is from the July 29, 2012, Modesto Bee.*

While it's crucial to repair the plumbing in the fragile Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, California has many water needs that are being overlooked.

Largely missing from the debate is the management of California's groundwater resources, which in dry years provide nearly 40 percent of the state's supplies. As the state enters a new phase of emphasizing delta solutions, these groundwater resources can't be ignored.

A recent study by the U.S. Geological Survey warns that the Central Valley aquifer is being depleted at an unsustainable rate, even though the state has enjoyed numerous wet years since the drought of the early 1990s.

"Unless we start doing very large-scale recycling, we run out of groundwater in the valley," Jay Famiglietti, director of hydrologic modeling at the University of California at Irvine, told The Sacramento Bee. "It might be 50 years or 100 years, but it is going to happen."

As with other studies, the USGS report finds that the most severe overdrafting of groundwater is occurring in the Tulare basin of the San Joaquin Valley, which is home to irrigated farmland and large dairy operations.

Scientists estimate the annual overdraft of the Tulare basin to be about 1.4 million acre-feet of water yearly – enough to supply more than 2.8 million households. Along with depleting

groundwater, agricultural operations are contaminating groundwater with nitrates – a health threat to all those who depend on wells for their drinking supply.

But the San Joaquin Valley isn't the only place where groundwater is being overpumped, land has subsided and aquifers are in danger of being depleted.

Read the whole story