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Satellite shows water dwindling in Africa

PASADENA, Calif., Dec. 13 (UPI) -- New satellite imagery has shown a disturbing downward trend in the supply of fresh water in several African river basins over the years.

The Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Southern California announced Tuesday that the U.S.-German Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment, or GRACE, project had provided a 5-year database confirming ongoing changes in the distribution of fresh water worldwide.

The results indicated a drying trend in major African basins such as the Nile, Congo and Zambezi while water supplies were increasing in the Mississippi and Colorado Basins of the United States.

While good news for American farmers and Southwestern cities, the ramifications for Africa are chilling given the region's historic vulnerability to drought, famine and intertribal violence.

Experts have said that they expect wars over water in the 21st century as supplies dwindle and are increasingly contested.

Earth sciences professor Jay Famiglietti of the University of California, Irvine said in a news release that GRACE provided a significant tool for long-term resource forecasting because it was able to detect the presence of underground water as well as surface supplies, including snow and ice.

"It's been speculated that many of Earth's key aquifers are being depleted due to over-exploitation, but a lack of data has hampered efforts to quantify how aquifer levels are changing and take the steps necessary to avoid depleting them," Famiglietti.

GRACE works by measuring minute month-to-month changes in Earth's gravity that are caused by the movement of water on the surface, underground and in the atmosphere.

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