



Water drain

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The days when Californians could sink a well and pump as much water as they wanted should have ended years ago. But the shrinking aquifers in the Central Valley show the need for the state to take a more active role in overseeing groundwater. California cannot craft sensible water policy by ignoring a source that accounts for 30 percent of the state's water supplies.

At the least, the Legislature should require rigorous statewide monitoring of underground basins. And the state needs the enforcement muscle to stop pumping that threatens to dry up underground water supplies.

But satellite data released by NASA this week showed the futility of California's hands-off approach to groundwater use. The satellite measurements tracked water loss between 2003 and March of this year. They revealed that the two largest aquifers in the Central Valley had lost nearly enough water to fill Lake Mead, the nation's largest reservoir. The water is being pumped out faster than it flows back in, depleting the underground basins — a practice NASA scientists termed "unsustainable."

But unlike other western states, California has little leverage to stop that excessive pumping. The state oversees water use from lakes and rivers, but has almost no role in groundwater use. Decisions are largely left to the local level. In many cases, landowners can drill a well and pump away without any permit from the state.

But such haphazard management of a key water source is madness for a state with an increasingly dry climate and a growing population. To cope with those trends, California will need to make efficient use of every drop of water it has.

The package of water bills approved by the Legislature last month made a tentative first step by requiring local agencies to measure basin water levels and report the data publicly. But the plan has gaps that make it less than comprehensive.

Setting rational policies requires knowing how much water remains in aquifers and how much people pump out. And the state needs better information on how much underground space is available for stockpiling water in the future.

Continuing to pump water without restriction also makes no sense for the state. Aquifers extend beyond private property lines and water district boundaries. How much water people take from one well affects the whole basin — and the state. California needs a mechanism for ensuring that reckless pumping does not deplete aquifers.

Some basins, such as those in San Bernardino/Riverside, Beaumont and Chino, have court oversight that limits pumping. But that basin-by-basin

approach still creates a regulatory patchwork that hinders comprehensive management of underground water.

Groundwater is not merely a local concern anymore, but a statewide issue. California can ensure sufficient water for the future, but not through ignorance of underground supplies, or disregard for pumping aquifers dry.
