

When Nature Trumps Politics

Is opposition to the expansion of the Eastern Virginia GWMA based on political ideology rather than science?

Because life itself depends on water and no commercial or industrial activity can exist without it, one would think that ensuring an adequate water supply would be a no-brainer; but grumbling can be heard already from some quarters. Those parties who oppose groundwater management of the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula solely on ideological grounds, such as rigid hostility to any kind of government regulation or promotion of economic development at all cost, must face the fact that defeating the groundwater management regulation would not halt the deterioration of the groundwater supply and prevent future supply crises.

Although trends are not necessarily destiny, the evidence points to the conclusion that the available groundwater supply is already overdrawn and that the problem will get worse in the next few decades. Based on historical trends, chiefly the period between 1985 and 2005, the population of the region is growing at a rate of 1.2 percent per year. In the past twenty years or so, almost 40,000 persons were added to the regional population, an amount equal to the combined populations of the counties of King George, Lancaster, and Northumberland. In the same time period, groundwater withdrawals rose by nearly 4 million gallons per day (1,460 million gallons per year), increasing from a total of about 11 mgd to nearly 16 mgd.

As a direct result of the growth in population and groundwater withdrawals, regional artesian water levels have been declining steadily and persistently, at rates of between 1.0 and nearly 3.0 feet per year. Throughout much of the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula, artesian water levels now stand at 35 to 80 feet below sea level and reach more than 200 feet below sea level in the vicinity of West Point (King William County). At the western edge of the region, in the vicinity of the Fall Zone (I-95 corridor), artesian water levels have reached or are approaching what the scientists of the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality term "critical levels." Recognizing the threat to the Virginia's valuable groundwater resources, the State Water Control Board in 1992 established two groundwater management areas, one on the Eastern Shore and another covering the James-York Peninsula and Southside Virginia. Now, the Board is proposing an extension of the Eastern Virginia Ground Water Management Area to the portion of the Coastal Plain aquifer system that underlies the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula. As the discussions of the proposed regulatory amendment proceed, both regulators and citizens alike must keep in mind that the ground rules that govern the structure and functioning of the aquifer system and therefore the available groundwater supply are defined by the laws of hydraulics and not by political ideology.

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