

Bureau of Mines starts new groundwater study for North Hills, Green Meadow

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A controversial temporary groundwater control area for the North Hills area will be allowed to expire in April, but that's not too worrisome to the residents who got a court order for the designation because of a new, more in-depth study slated to take place.

Vivian Drake, one of six landowners who went to court over the groundwater dispute, said the controlled groundwater designation lacked teeth because it only meant that people who wanted to sink new wells in the area had to get a \$50 permit from the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and were supposed to keep an eye on water levels.

She's more enthusiastic about a new study by the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology, which was authorized and given \$4.2 million by the 2009 Legislature to analyze groundwater and surface water data as part of a larger effort to shape statewide policy. The North Hills, along with the nearby Green Meadow area that has similar concerns over groundwater availability, are two places that will be investigated as part of the study.

"Until the data is in, it doesn't make sense to continue with the designation. We haven't seen much growth out here anyway, but I think that's due to the economy in the most part," Drake said. "You could still get a permit to drill out here.

"So many of us had given up because we didn't feel the DNRC was doing what it was supposed to do. We're glad the Legislature heard our cries and funded this program."

Terri McLaughlin, the DNRC water rights bureau chief, said about 10 people received permits to drill in the 11-square-mile North Hills groundwater control area since 2008. She readily acknowledged that the monitoring of water levels was sporadic.

"We have received some compliance with that," McLaughlin said. "In general, that area is showing some declines over time. However, there are other wells that have come back up.

"With our limited resources we are not able to get as much data as the Bureau of Mines will be able to. Once the study is done, we can look at the greater amount of data and the monitoring they're going to do to see if there might be a reason to go back in and designate a permanent groundwater control area."

The Bureau of Mines has started its work by assembling existing data, establishing new hydrologic monitoring and drilling exploratory and test wells. The state agency also will conduct aquifer tests, sample water quality and evaluate transpiration consumption by crops and other vegetation. In addition, it will create models to try to simulate certain hydrological conditions and see what impacts certain activities, like new wells, might have on existing groundwater uses.

Bureau officials note that the new study will be more extensive than a previous one, which detractors said was incomplete and erroneous.

“We’ll do an in-depth study, drill wells and do what we need to do to get a good handle on the geological settings, and use that to understand the hydrogeological makeup out there,” said John Wheaton, the Bureau of Mines program manager, who noted that the North Hills and Green Meadow sites are two of seven where the work is under way. “We’ll put it into a computer model to tie those ends together.”

Wheaton noted that the North Hills project was one they are going after aggressively, since a lot of information already is available. The project must wrap up by June 2011.

He added that people interested in the study can find out more by going online to www.mbm.mtech.edu/gwip/gwip.asp

North Hills’ landowners petitioned DNRC in 2001 to create the controlled groundwater area, saying they were concerned over water availability and groundwater nitrate concentrations. They wanted DNRC to close the area to new wells, but instead the agency just required new wells to go through the permit process. DNRC created the controlled groundwater area in October 2002.

Drake had claimed that more than 30 wells had run dry or became inoperable in the previous decade and nitrate levels were on the rise. This week, she said her own well had been showing “an uptick” in recent years, but now the level seems to be declining.

“It fluctuates,” said Drake, a hydrologist by trade. “I think the economic turnaround may be changing, so I’m glad they’re getting this study going now.”

Eve Byron: 447-4076 or eve.byron@helenair.com

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