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Ecology Asking for Help to Stop Ground Water Declines in Odessa Area

Spokane - Serious declines in ground water in the Odessa basin have irrigators and homeowners concerned about declining water supplies while state water resources officials are focusing on getting voluntary help to solve the problem. The Washington State Department of Ecology is urging those in the "Odessa sub-area" to help stop declines in the upper aquifer by repairing poorly constructed wells and properly building new wells.

The Odessa groundwater management sub-area is a designation that applies to about 1,100 square miles in Grant, Adams, Lincoln and Franklin counties. Water withdrawn from wells in this area has been closely regulated by Ecology since the 1970s.

"If wells are improperly cased and sealed, water is allowed to flow down the well bore all year long," said Regional Well Construction Coordinator Dan Weis of the Department of Ecology's Spokane office. Casing is a pipe, generally of metal or plastic, which is installed in the bore hole to maintain the opening. Sealing is a cement mixture between the casing and the bore hole wall.

"Improperly constructed wells allow water from the upper aquifer to drain down to the lower aquifer. That means that people with shallow wells are losing water to the lower aquifer and some of these wells actually run dry," Weis explained.

"Often the problem is caused by what's called 'open bore hole' (no proper casing or sealing) construction, and the loss of water is drastic," Weis adds. "Availability of water is critical to the economy of this area. Rather than issuing orders, we want to work with well owners, drillers and irrigators to solve the problem in a fair and effective way."

Ecology is asking well drillers and owners to help by voluntarily repairing the wells that have been constructed using the open bore hole method. New irrigation wells must be constructed with proper casing and sealing and must draw from a single aquifer. (If a well draws from both the upper and lower aquifer, the water in the upper aquifer is allowed to drain down. A well that penetrates only the upper aquifer can be open bore hole.) Existing wells will need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

Ecology staff plan to meet with both well drillers and owners soon to discuss the problem of the dwindling upper aquifer and work together on solutions to the problem. Resolutions may differ for individual wells, based on the location and conditions of the well and local geology. Ecology is sensitive to the fact that well owners need to work around the irrigation season as well as to the large potential cost of well repair.

Additionally, Ecology will hold a public workshop for well owners, to be announced soon, to clarify expectations and rules regarding domestic wells.