

Where water can be wealth – for fish, farms, and people

Ten years ago I wrote an editorial for this newspaper during Irrigation Festival week (5/5/93), talking about the connections between irrigation and drinking water because the first week of May is also National Drinking Water Week. I said, "Dungeness River water, flowing through over 100 miles of irrigation ditches, filters down into ground water throughout the Sequim-Dungeness Valley. Some of that ground water may be feeding your well, and pumped into your house for drinking."

Since then we have learned a great deal about the ground water system and how it interacts with streams and ditches. For example, three decades of eliminating leaks in the ditch system, improving on-farm efficiency, and residential development has radically changed the overall hydrology of this area.

Indeed, the last time the hydrology changed so much was probably 100 years ago when the ditches were built. River water was spread across fields, and the water table under the Sequim Prairie rose up to subsidize Gertr. Cassalery, Hurd, Matrotti and other creeks, at the expense of the flow and

fish habitat in the Dungeness. Several thousand settlers capitalized on that windfall high water table when they drilled their wells. But due to recent changes

in the hydrology, many 30-to 40-foot wells have had to be deepened to 100 feet and some 100-foot wells have been deepened to 150 feet or 200 feet.



GUEST OPINION
Ann Soule

Officials now advise that a water well's supply and quality is much safer when the well has been drilled to a water-bearing zone below at least one confining layer (such as clay).

Back when Dungeness River water soaked into the Sequim Prairie by the acre, a man-made "hydrologic equilibrium" was established – to the benefit of settlers but, we now know, at the expense of our co-inhabitants, the salmon. With recent and planned changes to the irrigation system, the hydrology will eventually reach an

other equilibrium, one that will restore natural streamflows in the river when fish need them. The associated cost is that we "settlers" will need to drill our wells into deeper, naturally-reliable zones.

The valley's prevalent coarse soils led to much of it being designated a critical aquifer recharge area, allowing for special ground water protection measures when land use decisions are made to prevent contamination and maintain natural recharge volumes.

This can be a powerful tool for long-term protection, but it doesn't cover development that existed before about 1995. We have learned – the hard way – just how susceptible our ground water is... for some residents of Agnew, the ground water flowing from their kitchen tap contains nitrates exceeding the standard for drinking.

Unfortunately, the cause of this contamination has not yet been determined since nitrate can come from many sources, including septic systems, fertilizers and animal waste. Because it is so easy for ground water to become contaminated, and difficult or impossible to clean up, all of us need to prevent contamination at our homes

and businesses. We do this at home by maintaining our septic system, soaking up oil spills, using chemicals sparingly or not at all, etc.

The county has partnered with other resource managers to understand the intricacies of the hydrologic system in order to manage our water efficiently for the benefit of fish, farms and people. For example, a new computer model will soon tell us how the local hydrology will be affected by full build-out of existing zoning. Relative to water quality, we are continually learning more about the specific risks of contamination from stormwater runoff from roads and urban areas – and methods to prevent their entry into the environment. Current research includes looking into whether stormwater contaminants exist in our streambeds, whether pharmaceuticals have entered our environment via wastewater, and the nitrate problem in Agnew. We are also soliciting owners of unused, deep wells for their potential inclusion in a monitoring network.

As mentioned in recent articles in this newspaper, the Dungeness River Management Team's watershed plan

(now in final review) and the county's proposed stormwater ordinance (public hearing on June 4) will both play significant roles in future management of ground water. Irrigation water and water quality protection. This week's watershed articles remind us that the irrigation-drinking water connection is still there and always will be to some degree.

With the goal of focusing attention on ground water concerns, the Clallam County Board of Commissioners and the Sequim City Council recently passed resolutions recognizing the Sequim-Dungeness Groundwater Guardian Community, a designation of the National Groundwater Foundation. In 10 years we've come a long way, but the bottom line hasn't changed: clean ground water is a precious but vulnerable public resource and we must be vigilant to keep it that way.

Ann Soule has been working for Clallam County on ground water and water resource issues since 1991. She is a licensed hydrogeologist and can be reached at the courthouse at 360-417-2424 or asoule@co.clallam.wa.us.

Letters

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It is a well-known fact that when a project, proposal, or for that matter a war, is proposed that the vast majority of vocal and written reaction will be against it. Unfortunately those of us who agree generally sit on our hands and wait for others to determine the outcome.

Well this time I am not going to do that, and wish to give the proposal 100-percent support. Why? Because it will be in Sequim's benefit, both short and long term.

As the article by Dan Ross pointed out some weeks ago, there are lots of people in Sequim that travel many miles to Silverdale and P.A. to spend their dollars outside of Sequim. These developments will keep those dollars here and in addition attract others to spend here as well, not only at Wal-Mart and Home Depot but at other businesses as well. Also consider the alternative. Sequim will remain that sleepy retirement town struggling for every dollar it needs to adequately provide for its citizen's infrastructure needs.

Brian Wilson
Sequim

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