
Effect of Urbanization on Aquifer Recharge in the Santa Clarita Valley
John Porcello, CH2MHILL, February 22, 2004

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Introduction

In a groundwater basin, the effect of urbanization on recharge to underlying groundwater is dependent on land uses, water uses, vegetative cover, and geologic conditions. Groundwater recharge from undeveloped lands occurs from precipitation alone, whereas areas that are developed for agricultural or urban land uses receive both precipitation and irrigation of vegetative cover. In an urban area, groundwater recharge occurs directly beneath irrigated lands and in drainages whose bottoms are not paved or cemented. This memorandum discusses the general effects of urbanization on groundwater recharge and the specific effects in the Santa Clarita Valley.

Summary of Findings

In the Santa Clarita Valley, stormwater runoff finds its way to the Santa Clara River and its tributaries, whose channels are predominantly natural and consist of vegetation and coarse-grained sediments (rather than concrete). The stormwater that flows across paved lands in the Santa Clarita Valley is routed to stormwater detention basins and to the river channels, where the porous nature of the sands and gravels forming the streambeds allow for significant infiltration to occur to the underlying groundwater.

Increased urbanization in the Valley has resulted in the irrigation of previously undeveloped lands. The effect of irrigation is to maintain higher soil moisture levels during the summer than would exist if no irrigation were occurring. Consequently, a greater percentage of the fall/winter precipitation recharges groundwater beneath irrigated land parcels than beneath undeveloped land parcels. In addition, urbanization in the Santa Clarita Valley has occurred in part because of the importation of State Water Project (SWP) water, which began in 1980. SWP water use has increased steadily, reaching nearly 44,500 acre-feet (AF) in 2003. Two-thirds of this water is used outdoors, and a portion of this water eventually infiltrates to groundwater. The other one-third is used indoors and is subsequently routed to local water reclamation plants (WRPs) and then to the Santa Clara River (after treatment). A portion of this water flows downstream out of the basin, and a portion infiltrates to groundwater.

Records show that groundwater levels and the amount of groundwater in storage were similar in both the late 1990s and the early 1980s, despite a significant increase in the

urbanized area during these two decades. This long-term stability of groundwater levels is attributed in part to the significant volume of natural recharge that occurs in the streambeds, which do not contain paved, urban land areas. On a long-term historical basis, groundwater pumping volumes have not increased due to urbanization, compared with pumping volumes during the 1950s and 1960s when water was used primarily for agriculture. Also, the importation of SWP water is another process that contributes to recharge in the Valley. In summary, urbanization has been accompanied by long-term stability in pumping and groundwater levels, plus the addition of imported SWP water to the Valley, which together have not reduced recharge to groundwater, nor depleted the amount of groundwater that is in storage within the Valley.

Effect of Pavement on Recharge Beneath Specific Land Parcels

The amount of paved cover on the ground affects the degree to which rainfall and outdoor-applied urban water will be able to infiltrate to groundwater. In heavily industrialized areas with high percentages of paved cover, such as exist in portions of the Los Angeles Basin, less rainfall recharge will occur than if the land is in an undeveloped condition. Furthermore, if the bottoms of rivers and other drainages are paved, then the majority of stormwater generated during a rainfall event will be unable to infiltrate to groundwater. In contrast, the amount of recharge to groundwater will be greater in urbanized areas, such as the Santa Clarita Valley, that have natural soils in the bottoms of rivers and local drainages or that have lower percentages of paved cover on the developed areas lying outside the principal drainages. In these areas, the outdoor use of water for irrigation landscape vegetation or agricultural lands can notably increase the amount of groundwater recharge, particularly if the outdoor water is imported from outside the local groundwater basin. This is discussed further below.

Effect of Vegetative Cover and Water Use

From the 1930s through the 1960s, H.F. Blaney and other researchers at the U.S. Department of Agriculture performed numerous studies to measure the amount of infiltration to groundwater that occurs beneath undeveloped lands and irrigated farmlands, and the differences in recharge rates for different types of native vegetation and crops. In California, these studies included a 1933 study by Blaney in Ventura County, a 1963 study by Blaney and others in the Lompoc Uplands, studies by the U.S. Geological Survey and various consultants in the Montecito and Carpenteria groundwater basins, and a groundwater basin study by Santa Barbara County¹ that incorporated the results of these earlier studies.

Together, these studies concluded that deep percolation to groundwater from undeveloped lands occurs only during years of average or above-average precipitation. This occurs because:

1. Southern California's rainfall is highly seasonal in nature, whereupon most rainfall occurs during the relatively cool period November through March, when plant water

¹ See Santa Barbara County Water Agency, December 15, 1977. *Report on Adequacy of the Groundwater Basins of Santa Barbara County.*

requirements are low, and little, if any, rainfall occurs during the remaining (and warmer months) when plant water requirements increase.

2. During the summer, when little or no rainfall occurs, the native vegetation extracts the residual moisture that is present in the soil, which substantially decreases the soil moisture within the root zone of the vegetation. At the end of the dry season, soil moisture levels on undeveloped lands are below the soil's field capacity, which is the amount of moisture that must be present in the soil before free drainage of water can occur below the rooting zone of the native vegetation.
3. When the seasonal rains arrive, the incident rainfall that is not consumed by plants and does not become stormwater runoff must first raise the soil moisture level to the soil's field capacity before any groundwater recharge will occur. The various studies indicate that about 17 inches/year of rainfall is necessary to raise the soil moisture to the field capacity on an undeveloped parcel of land. This is similar to the average annual rainfall in the Santa Clarita Valley and in other lowland coastal and near-coastal valleys in southern California.

On irrigated lands, irrigation occurs during several months of the year, with the exact duration depending on the amount and timing of rainfall and also the crops or type of urban landscaping being irrigated. The principal effect of converting undeveloped land to land that receives agricultural or urban irrigation is to increase the amount of water that is applied to the land during the low-rainfall months. This application of water to the vegetative cover on the surface of the developed land parcel results in the maintenance of higher soil moisture levels during the warm, dry months than would occur without development. This has three effects:

1. Because irrigation will generally be performed in a manner that maintains the health of the vegetative cover, enough water will be applied to maintain the soil moisture at, or close to, the field capacity of the soil. This in turn will allow some deep percolation to occur from the irrigation water itself.
2. When the rainy season begins, because irrigation has maintained soil moisture at or near field capacity, less of the initial rainfall entering the root zone needs to be stored in the soil (to meet soil moisture deficits) beneath an irrigated parcel than in the case of an undeveloped parcel. Therefore, a greater percentage of the initial rainfall and annual rainfall will be able to infiltrate to groundwater. The southern California studies estimated that irrigated land parcels would allow rainfall infiltration to occur in years when annual rainfall is at least 10.5 inches/year. This threshold rainfall value is 6.5 inches less than the threshold rainfall value that the studies estimated to be necessary for generating groundwater recharge beneath undeveloped land parcels.
3. Because the majority of irrigation occurs during the dry (low-rainfall) months, the total annual recharge to groundwater from irrigated developed lands is the sum of: (a) the deep percolation arising from irrigation (during the low-rainfall months); and (b) rainfall (during the months when less irrigation is occurring). Therefore, groundwater recharge beneath developed lands is greater and occurs for a longer period of time each year than in the case of undeveloped lands where no irrigation is occurring.

Historical Observations of Groundwater Conditions in the Santa Clarita Valley

The findings of the studies described above for other groundwater basins in southern California are consistent with observations that have been made in the Santa Clarita Valley, which are based on long-term water level records, water budget analyses, and groundwater modeling. Based on a month-by-month calibration to a 20-year record of historical water level records (throughout the Valley) and stream gaging records (at the Los Angeles – Ventura County line), the model simulates 10 percent of the applied outdoor water as being available for recharge to groundwater in retail and residential areas, with greater percentages infiltrating beneath golf courses and agricultural lands. This is consistent with a 1980 study by DWR of the groundwater resources of the Santee and El Monte hydrologic subareas of San Diego County. In that study, which was performed to evaluate reclaimed water use plans, DWR concluded that approximately 20 percent of the applied outdoor water in municipal areas infiltrates to the water table, with the remaining 80 percent going to evapotranspiration and direct evaporation. DWR also concluded that there would likely be no significant change in these percentages as urbanization continues.²

In the Santa Clarita Valley, as in any urbanized area, urbanization increases the paved area and can increase the magnitude and intensity of stormwater runoff from paved land areas. In the Santa Clarita Valley, this stormwater runoff will find its way to the Santa Clara River and its tributaries, whose channels are predominantly natural and consist of vegetation and coarse-grained sediments (rather than concrete). The stormwater that flows across paved lands in the Santa Clarita Valley is routed to stormwater detention basins and to the river channels, where the porous nature of the sands and gravels forming the streambeds allow for significant infiltration to occur to the underlying groundwater. Consequently, for a developed land parcel, the water that runs off of the paved portion of the land parcel will infiltrate to groundwater from a detention basin or a riverbed, rather than infiltrating onsite.

Riverbed infiltration is a significant percentage of total recharge in the Santa Clarita Valley in any given year. Streamflow records and the model calibration process together demonstrate that year-to-year fluctuations in total recharge in the Valley arise not just from year-to-year variations in incident rainfall within the Valley, but also from year-to-year variations in streamflows in the Santa Clara River and its tributaries. Because the areas contributing flow to the rivers are located both within and outside of the Valley, the recharge that occurs from riverbeds is a significant source of groundwater recharge within the Valley.

Evidence that stormwater infiltration to groundwater is not significantly decreased by urbanization comes from long-term water level records at wells completed in the Alluvial aquifer. These records show that groundwater levels and the amount of groundwater in storage were similar in both the late 1990s and the early 1980s, despite a significant increase in the urbanized area during these two decades. This long-term stability is attributed in part to the significant volume of natural recharge that occurs in the streambeds, which do not contain paved, urban land areas. Also, groundwater pumping volumes have not increased

² See State of California, Department of Water Resources, Southern District. August 1984, *San Diego County Cooperative Ground Water Studies: Reclaimed Water Use, Phase II*. Pages 40-41.

due to urbanization, compared with pumping volumes during the 1950s and 1960s when water was used primarily for agriculture. Additionally, beginning in 1980, water was imported into the Santa Clarita Valley from the State Water Project (SWP) for urban use, with SWP water use reaching nearly 30,000 acre-feet per year (AF/yr) by the end of the 1990s, and progressively increasing from about 32,500 AF in 2000 to nearly 44,500 AF in 2003. Because two-thirds of the total urban water demand is used outdoors, a substantial portion of the imported SWP water has been and continues to be applied to urban landscaping, thereby increasing the amount of recharge to groundwater. The remaining urban water is used indoors, and is subsequently routed to local water reclamation plants (WRPs) and then to the Santa Clara River (after treatment). A portion of this water flows downstream out of the basin, and a portion infiltrates to groundwater.

In summary, urbanization has been accompanied by long-term stability in pumping and groundwater levels, plus the addition of imported SWP water to the Valley, which together have not reduced recharge to groundwater, nor depleted the amount of groundwater that is in storage within the Valley.