

The water down below

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Just when you thought this space had already pounded on virtually every mistake imaginable by the state of California, another possible looming disaster -- again due to this state's head-in-the-ground management style -- is ripe for the ripping.

Here on the North Coast, as in the rest of this humongous state, we hear a lot about water. How much water is being released into rivers; how much water fish will need to thrive; how much water the community of Redway needs to keep its needs met in a drought; and how we can protect one of our most precious resources from those afar in drier climates who dream of tapping into North Coast watersheds to feed their parched enterprises.

But because groundwater is not readily visible to politicians and the voters who put them in power, attention to what is perhaps the most pivotal of water resources has not been paid.

To start with, there is virtually no regulation of groundwater pumping in California and that fact has already led to thirsty farmers taking more than they should, to the point that the floor of the Central Valley is literally sinking over parts of the California aqueduct.

Some might say that condition simply matches the plummeting fortunes of what once was aptly named the Golden State.

But groundwater problems are not just limited to flatlanders. Similar, though so far less severe, problems are also emerging on the Mattole, South Fork of the Eel and Upper Klamath rivers. Groundwater is essential

to surface flows, drinking water and water for salmon and other fish, experts say, and even in a temperate rain forest like the Humboldt County region, shortages occur.

We desperately need regulation to assess the state of California's groundwater supplies, and to limit how and when it can be tapped. Limitless siphoning, especially to feed mammoth agricultural operations, can only lead to disaster. And while sustained and willful ignorance is no excuse, it may be the primary culprit.

And while there is obviously a huge problem to be dealt with, the state can't even find the money to help identify and address the issue, given its budget collapse. So the federal government has had to step in to cover the costs just to ensure there is a base level of knowledge on the subject. The state's program, the Groundwater Ambient Monitoring and Assessment program, is now being funded by the USGS's National Water Quality Assessment program.