

MANAGING WATER RESOURCES SYSTEMS: WHY "SAFE YIELD" IS NOT SUSTAINABLE

by Marios Sophocleous^a

Although major gaps in our understanding of soil and water ecosystems still exist, of more importance are the gaps between what is known and what is applied. One such gap is in the use of the concept of "safe yield" (SY) in ground-water management. Despite being repeatedly discredited in the literature, SY continues to be used as the basis of state and local water-management policies, leading to continued ground-water depletion, stream dewatering, and loss of wetland and riparian ecosystems.

Traditionally, "safe yield" has been defined as the attainment and maintenance of a long-term balance between the amount of ground water withdrawn annually and the annual amount of recharge. Thus, SY limits ground-water pumping to the amount that is replenished naturally. Unfortunately, this concept of SY ignores discharge from the system. Under natural or equilibrium conditions, recharge is balanced, in the long term, by discharge from the aquifer into a stream, spring, or seep. Consequently, if pumping equals recharge, eventually streams, marshes, and springs dry up. Continued pumping in excess of recharge also eventually depletes the aquifer. This has happened in various locations across the Great Plains. Maps comparing the perennial streams in Kansas in the 1960s to those of the 1990s show a marked decrease in miles of streamflow in the western third of the state. (For more information on SY, see the edited volume by Sophocleous, 1997, "Perspectives on Sustainable Development of Water Resources in Kansas," Kansas Geological Survey, Bulletin 239, in press.) Policymakers are primarily concerned about aquifer drawdown and surface-water depletion, both unrelated to the natural recharge rate. Despite its irrelevance, natural recharge is often used in ground-water policy to balance ground-water use under the banner of SY. Adopting such an attractive fallacy does not provide scientific credibility.

To better understand why "safe yield" is not sustainable yield, a review of hydrologic principles (concisely stated by Theis in 1940) is required. Under natural conditions, prior to development by wells, aquifers are in a state of approximate dynamic equilibrium: over hundreds of years, recharge equals discharge. Discharge from wells upsets this equilibrium by producing a loss from aquifer storage. A new state of dynamic equilibrium is reached only by an increase in recharge (induced recharge), a decrease in natural discharge, or a combination of the two. Initially, ground water pumped from the aquifer comes from storage, but ultimately it comes from induced recharge. The timing of this transition, which takes a long time by human standards, is a key factor in developing sustainable water-use policies. However, it is exceedingly difficult to distinguish between natural recharge and induced recharge to ascertain possible sustained yield. This is an area that needs further research. Calibrated stream-aquifer models could provide some answers in this regard.

The concept of sustainable yield has been around for many years, but a quantitative methodology for the estimation of such yield has not yet been perfected. A suitable hydrologic basis for determining the magnitude of possible development would be a quantification of the transition curve (from ground-water storage depletion to full reliance on induced recharge), coupled with a projected pattern of drawdown for the system under consideration. The level of ground-water development would be calculated using specified withdrawal rates, well-field locations, drawdown limits, and a defined planning horizon. Stream-aquifer models are capable of generating the transition curve for most situations.

Another problem with SY is that it has often been used as a single-product exploitation goal—the number of trees that can be cut, the number of fish that can be caught, the volume of water that can be pumped from the ground or river, year after year, without destroying the resource base. But experience has repeatedly shown that other resources inevitably depend on the exploited product. We can maximize our SY of water by drying up our streams, but when we do, we learn that the streams were more than just containers of usable water.

A better definition of SY would address the sustainability of the system—not just the trees, but the whole forest; not just the fish, but the marine food chain; not just the ground water, but the running streams, wetlands, and all the plants and animals that depend on it. Given the dynamic connectedness of a watershed, management activities can fragment the habitat "patches" if they are not planned and implemented from an ecosystem and watershed perspective. Such a holistic approach, however, is fraught with difficulty. We cannot use a natural system without altering it, and the more intensive and efficient the use, the greater the alteration.

Science will never know all there is to know. Rather than allowing the unknown or uncertain to paralyze us, we must apply the best of what we know today, and, at the same time, be flexible enough to allow for change and for what we do not yet know. Instead of determining a fixed sustainable yield, managers should recognize that yield varies over time as environmental conditions vary.

Our understanding of the basic principles of soil and water systems is fairly good, but our ability to use this knowledge to solve problems in complex local and cultural settings is relatively weak. Communication is vital. We need people who can transfer research findings to the field and who can also communicate water-users' needs to the researchers. Delivering a journal publication to a manager's desk is not sufficient to ensure that research results are quickly put into practice. I believe this breakdown in communication accounts for the persistence of such misguided concepts as SY in ground-water management today. Researchers increasingly must cross the boundaries of their individual disciplines, and they must look to their clients—the managers and water users—for help in defining a practical context for research. A strong public education program is also needed to improve understanding of the nature and complexity of ground-water resources and to emphasize how this understanding must form the basis for operating conditions and constraints. This is the only way to positively influence, for the long term, the attitudes of the various stakeholders involved.

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