

U.S. Geological Survey and the California State Water Resources Control Board

Groundwater Quality in the Owens Valley, California

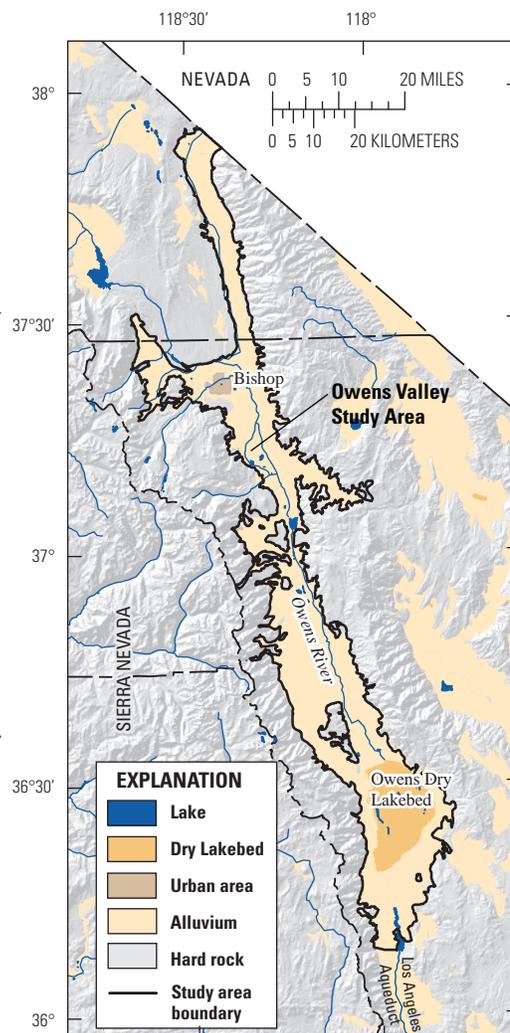
Groundwater provides more than 40 percent of California's drinking water. To protect this vital resource, the State of California created the Groundwater Ambient Monitoring and Assessment (GAMA) Program. The Priority Basin Project of the GAMA Program provides a comprehensive assessment of the State's groundwater quality and increases public access to groundwater-quality information. Owens Valley is one of the study areas being evaluated.



The Owens Study Area

The Owens study area is approximately 1,030 square miles (2,668 square kilometers) and includes the Owens Valley groundwater basin (California Department of Water Resources, 2003). Owens Valley has a semiarid to arid climate, with average annual rainfall of about 6 inches (15 centimeters). The study area has internal drainage, with runoff primarily from the Sierra Nevada draining east to the Owens River, which flows south to Owens Lake dry lakebed at the southern end of the valley. Beginning in the early 1900s, the City of Los Angeles began diverting the flow of the Owens River to the Los Angeles Aqueduct, resulting in the evaporation of Owens Lake and the formation of the current Owens Lake dry lakebed. Land use in the study area is approximately 94 percent (%) natural, 5% agricultural, and 1% urban. The primary natural land cover is shrubland. The largest urban area is the city of Bishop (2010 population of 4,000).

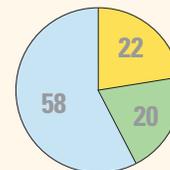
Groundwater in this basin is used for public and domestic water supply and for irrigation. The main water-bearing units are gravel, sand, silt, and clay derived from surrounding mountains. Recharge to the groundwater system is primarily runoff from the Sierra Nevada, and by direct infiltration of irrigation. The primary sources of discharge are pumping wells, evapotranspiration, and underflow to the Owens Lake dry lakebed. The primary aquifers in Owens Valley are defined as those parts of the aquifers corresponding to the perforated intervals of wells listed in the California Department of Public Health database. Public-supply wells in Owens Valley are completed to depths between 210 and 480 feet (64 to 146 meters), consist of solid casing from the land surface to a depth of 50 to 80 feet (15 to 24 meters), and are screened or perforated below the solid casing.



Overview of Water Quality

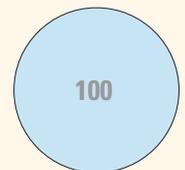
Inorganic constituents

Number analyzed: 27



Organic constituents

Number analyzed: 79



CONSTITUENT CONCENTRATIONS

● High ● Moderate ● Low or not detected

Pie charts illustrate the percentage of the primary aquifers, on an areal basis, with concentrations in the three specified categories.

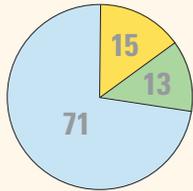
GAMA's Priority Basin Project evaluates the quality of untreated groundwater. However, for context, benchmarks established for drinking-water quality are used for comparison. Benchmarks and definitions of high, moderate, and low concentrations are discussed in the inset box on page 3. The USGS sampled 40 wells for this assessment; data from the California Department of Public Health database were used to supplement USGS data.

Many inorganic constituents occur naturally in groundwater. The concentrations of the inorganic constituents can be affected by natural processes as well as by human activities. In the Owens study area, one or more inorganic constituents were present at high concentrations in 22% of the primary aquifers and at moderate concentrations in 20%.

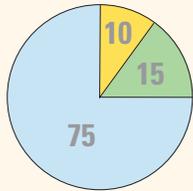
Organic constituents are present in products used in the home, business, industry, and agriculture. Organic constituents can enter the groundwater system through normal usage, spills, or improper disposal. In the Owens study area, no organic constituents were present at high or moderate concentrations.

RESULTS: Groundwater Quality in the Owens Study Area

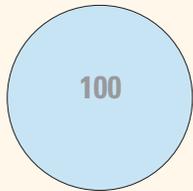
INORGANIC CONSTITUENTS



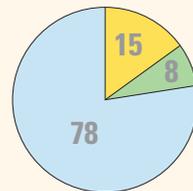
Trace elements



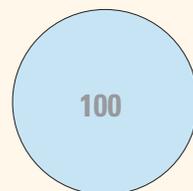
Radioactive constituents



Nutrients



Other inorganic constituents



Perchlorate

Inorganic Constituents with Human-Health Benchmarks

Trace elements are naturally present in the minerals in rocks and soils, and in the water that comes into contact with those materials. In the Owens study area, trace elements with human-health benchmarks were present at high concentrations in 15% of the primary aquifers, on an areal basis, and at moderate concentrations in 13%. Of the 17 trace elements with human-health benchmarks analyzed in this study, 4 were detected at high concentrations: arsenic, boron, fluoride, and molybdenum.

Radioactivity is the release of energy or energetic particles during structural changes in the nucleus of an atom. Most of the radioactivity in groundwater comes from decay of naturally occurring isotopes of uranium and thorium that are present in minerals in the aquifer. In the Owens study area, radioactive constituents were found at concentrations above benchmarks in 10% of the primary aquifers, and at moderate concentrations in 15%. Six radioactive constituents were analyzed; of these, gross alpha radioactivity and uranium were detected above human-health benchmarks. Radon was detected at values within one-half of the proposed upper benchmark.

Nutrients, such as nitrate and nitrite, are naturally present at low concentrations in groundwater. High and moderate concentrations generally occur as a result of human activities, such as fertilizer application, livestock waste, or septic-system seepage. Of the three nutrients with health-based benchmarks analyzed, none were detected at concentrations above benchmarks.

Inorganic Constituents with Non-Health Benchmarks

(Not included in water-quality overview charts shown on the front page)

Other inorganic constituents, such as total dissolved solids and manganese, affect the aesthetic properties of water, such as taste, color, or odor. In the Owens study area, these constituents were present at high concentrations in 15% of the primary aquifers, and at moderate concentrations in 8%. Of the seven constituents with non-health-based benchmarks that were analyzed, three (iron, manganese, and total dissolved solids) were detected at concentrations above benchmarks.

Special Interest: Perchlorate

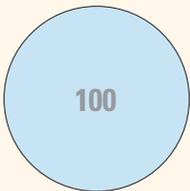
Perchlorate is an inorganic constituent which has been regulated in California drinking water since 2007. It is an ingredient in rocket fuel, fireworks, safety flares, may be present in some fertilizers, and also occurs naturally at low concentrations in groundwater. In the Owens study area, perchlorate was not detected at high or moderate concentrations in the primary aquifers.

RESULTS: Groundwater Quality in the Owens Study Area

ORGANIC CONSTITUENTS

Organic Constituents with Human-Health Benchmarks

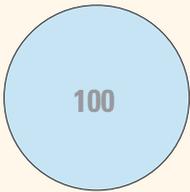
The Priority Basin Project uses laboratory methods that can detect the presence of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and pesticides at low concentrations, far below human-health benchmarks. VOCs and pesticides detected at these low concentrations can be used to help trace water from the land surface into the aquifer system.



Volatile organic compounds

Volatile Organic Compounds

VOCs are present in many household, commercial, industrial, and agricultural products and are characterized by their tendency to volatilize into the air. Of 56 VOCs with health-based benchmarks analyzed in the Owens study area, none were present at high or moderate concentrations in the Owens primary aquifers.



Pesticides

Pesticides

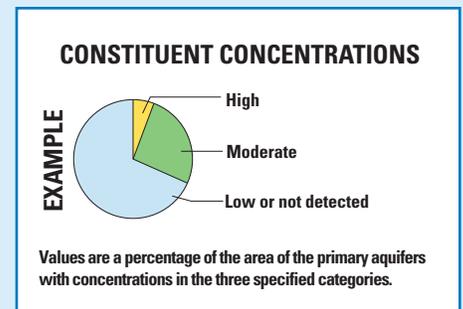
Pesticides are used on lawns, in gardens, around buildings, along roads, and in agriculture to help control unwanted vegetation (weeds), insects, fungi, and other pests. In the Owens study area, pesticides were not detected or were only detected at low concentrations. Of the 20 pesticides with health-based benchmarks that were analyzed, none were detected at high or moderate concentrations in the Owens primary aquifers.

BENCHMARKS FOR EVALUATING GROUNDWATER QUALITY

GAMA's Priority Basin Project uses benchmarks established for drinking water to provide context for evaluating the quality of untreated groundwater. After withdrawal, groundwater may be disinfected, filtered, mixed, or exposed to the atmosphere before being delivered to consumers. Federal and California regulatory benchmarks for protecting human health (Maximum Contaminant Level, MCL) are used when available. Otherwise, nonregulatory benchmarks for protecting human health (Notification Level, NL, and Lifetime Health Advisory, HAL) and nonregulatory benchmarks for protecting aesthetic properties such as taste and odor (Secondary Maximum Contaminant Level, SMCL) are used.

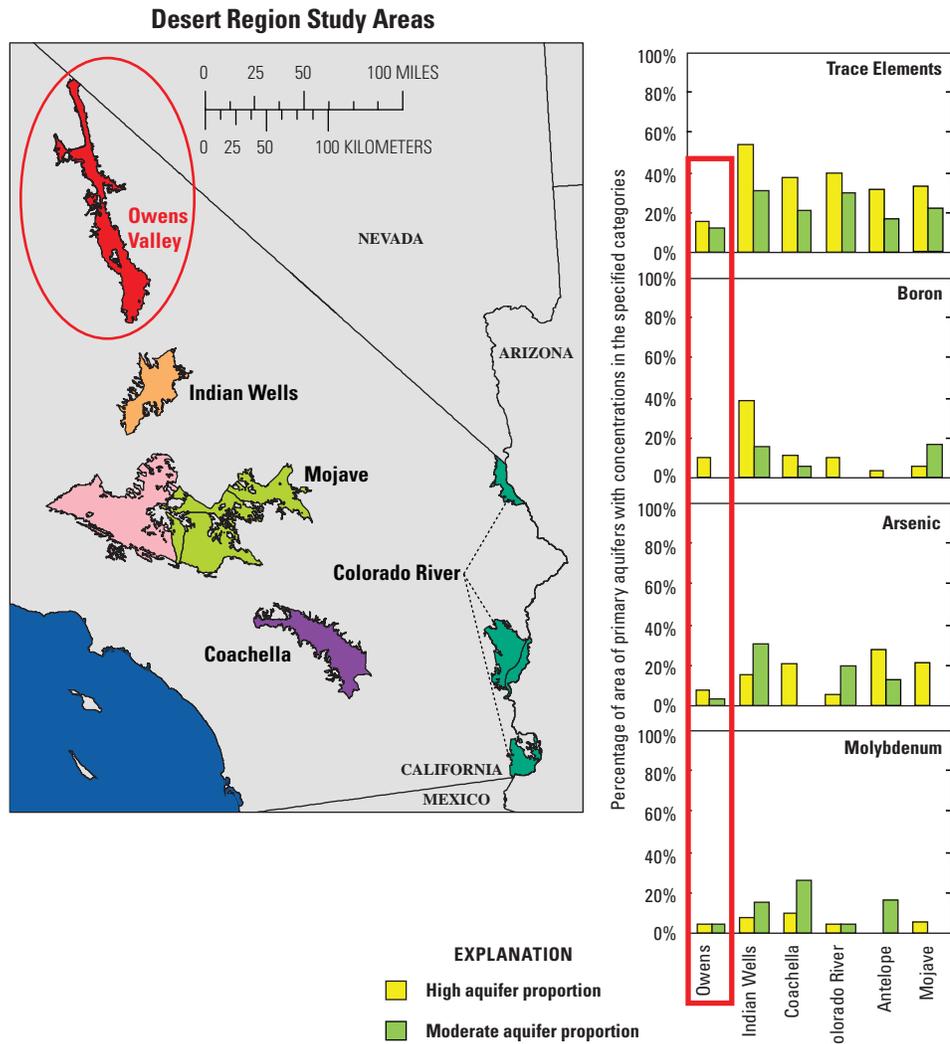
High, moderate, and low concentrations are defined relative to benchmarks

Concentrations are considered *high* if they are greater than a benchmark. For inorganic constituents, concentrations are *moderate* if they are greater than one-half of a benchmark. For organic and special-interest constituents, concentrations are considered *moderate* if they are greater than one-tenth of a benchmark; this lower threshold was used because organic constituents are generally less prevalent and have smaller concentrations relative to benchmarks than inorganic constituents. *Low* concentrations include non-detections and values less than moderate concentrations. Methods for evaluating water quality are discussed by Milby Dawson and Belitz (2012).



Trace Element Concentrations Throughout the California Desert Region

Trace elements were present at high concentrations in all of the Desert Region primary aquifers. In the Owens study area, trace elements were high in 15% of the primary aquifers, which is the smallest percentage of high trace elements in the Desert region (Milby Dawson and Belitz, 2012). The trace elements with the highest areal percentages in Owens Valley were boron (high concentrations in 10% of the primary aquifers), arsenic (8%), and molybdenum (5%). Boron and arsenic were detected at high concentrations in all of the Desert primary aquifers; molybdenum was detected at high concentrations in five of the six Desert Region study areas.



Priority Basin Assessments

GAMA's Priority Basin Project (PBP) assesses water quality in that part of the aquifer system used for drinking water, primarily public supply. Water quality in shallower and deeper parts may differ from water quality in the primary aquifers. GAMA's Domestic Well Project assesses water quality in the shallower parts of the aquifer system. Ongoing assessments are being conducted in more than 120 basins throughout California.

The PBP assessments are based on a comparison of constituent concentrations in untreated groundwater with benchmarks established for the protection of human health and for aesthetic concerns. The PBP does not evaluate the quality of drinking water delivered to consumers.

The PBP uses two approaches for assessing groundwater quality. The first approach uses a network of wells to provide a statistically based assessment of the status of groundwater quality. The second approach uses additional wells to help assess the factors that affect water quality. Both approaches use data routinely collected for regulatory compliance, as well as data collected by the PBP. The PBP includes chemical analyses not generally available as part of regulatory compliance monitoring, including measurements at concentrations much lower than human-health benchmarks, and measurement of constituents that can be used to trace the sources and movement of groundwater.

For more information

Technical reports and hydrologic data collected for the GAMA Program may be obtained from:

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By Barbara J. Milby Dawson and Kenneth Belitz

SELECTED REFERENCES

California Department of Water Resources, 2003, California's groundwater: California Department of Water Resources Bulletin 118, 246 p., available at <http://www.water.ca.gov/groundwater/bulletin118/update2003.cfm>

Densmore, J.N., Fram, M.S., and Belitz, K., 2009, Ground-water quality data in the Owens and Indian Wells Valleys study unit, 2006—Results from the California GAMA Program: U.S. Geological Survey Data Series 427, 86 p., available at <http://pubs.usgs.gov/ds/427>

Milby Dawson, B.J., and Belitz, K., 2010, Status of groundwater quality in the California Desert Region, 2006–2008—California GAMA Program Priority Basin Project: U.S. Geological Survey Scientific Investigations Report 2010-5040, 100 p.