



Figure 1.--Area of report (shaded).



Figure 2.--Generalized distribution of rock types in Avra Valley.

INTRODUCTION

Avra Valley is a large north-trending alluvial basin about 15 mi west of Tucson in Pima and Pinal Counties, Arizona (Fig. 1). The 50-square-mile valley is located in the east and west by steep mountain ranges that rise abruptly above a broad and gently sloping valley floor. The climate of Avra Valley is semiarid, and the average annual precipitation ranges from 8 to 12 in. (Carter and Holt, 1973). Two major ephemeral streams, the Santa Cruz River and Broadway Wash, drain the area. These streams and their tributaries provide a source of recharge to an extensive alluvial aquifer that underlies the valley floor. The aquifer consists of interbedded gravel, sand, silt, and clay and contains a vast quantity of ground water.

The physiography, fertile soil, and mild climate of Avra Valley make it an ideal environment for agriculture and urban development. Historically, the valley has been a sparsely populated agricultural area, but in recent years a shift toward urbanization has taken place. Demand for water in the area is high. Sewerage is intermittent and generally of short duration and therefore is not a dependable source of water. Ground water pumped from the aquifer is the main source of water in the valley and is also used to supplement supplies in the adjacent Tucson basin. Although the aquifer is replenished by natural recharge and underflow, rates of recharge and underflow have not kept pace with the rate of pumping. Pumping has exceeded recharge for several decades, resulting in a lowering of ground-water levels throughout most of the valley. In places, water-level declines have resulted in small amounts of aquifer compaction and land subsidence. Earth fissures, some of which may be the result of localized differential subsidence, have also been observed in the valley.

Aquifer compaction, land subsidence, and earth fissures can severely damage or affect the functional capability of man-made features. Aquifer compaction may damage wells, differential land subsidence may adversely affect structures such as sewers and irrigation water-supply systems that are dependent on gravity for their operation, and fissures may damage engineered structures. In addition, compaction and subsidence can seriously reduce the groundwater storage capacity of the aquifer, and fissures may provide a direct path for the rapid movement of contaminants from the land surface to the aquifer.

Damage that results from compaction, subsidence, and fissuring has occurred in the Elroy-Picacho area northwest of Avra Valley (Schumann and Holand, 1970; Lacey and others, 1973). Hundreds of square miles in and near the Elroy-Picacho area have been affected by compaction, subsidence, and fissures induced by ground-water withdrawal. Survey data indicate that 120 mi² subsided about 7 to 12.5 ft from 1952 to 1977. Many earth fissures have opened in this area; the fissures commonly are more than 1,000 ft long and generally surround areas of large water-level decline and subsidence. The potential for related damage in Avra Valley was suggested by Catto and Sogge (1982).

GEOHYDROLOGIC SETTING

In 1939 the U.S. Geological Survey, in cooperation with the city of Tucson, began an investigation of aquifer compaction and the effects of land subsidence and earth fissures in the Tucson basin (Anderson, 1982a). In 1983 the investigation was expanded to include Avra Valley. The primary purposes of the investigation are to monitor the amount of aquifer compaction and land subsidence and to define areas of related potential hazards. This report describes geohydrologic characteristics of Avra Valley that may contribute to potential aquifer compaction, land subsidence, and earth fissures.

The quantitative evaluation of potential land subsidence in this report is presented as an interim land- and water-use planning tool pending acquisition and study of additional data. Cautious interpretation of the results is necessary because only a small amount of compaction and subsidence had occurred in Avra Valley as of 1986. Because of data limitations, the evaluation is made on the assumption that future rates of compaction and subsidence in Avra Valley will be similar to those in the Elroy-Picacho area. The evaluation also assumes that water-level declines in the aquifer will continue. Several factors that may reduce ground-water withdrawals, and thus the potential for compaction and subsidence in Avra Valley, were not evaluated. These factors include the execution of the 1980 Arizona Ground-Water Management Act, the planned installation of Colorado River water by the Central Arizona Project, the increased reuse and redistribution of effluent, and the probable long-term decrease in pumping by agricultural and some industrial users.

Sedimentary units of the aquifer in Avra Valley are, in this report, assigned geologic names derived from a sequence of sedimentary units of similar age in the adjacent Tucson basin (Davidson, 1972; Allen, 1981; Anderson, 1982a, 1982b). Correlation of Avra Valley sedimentary units with their Tucson basin counterparts is based on similar physical characteristics, stratigraphic position, and relation to volcanic rocks of Tertiary age. Some of the stratigraphic and structural relations in this report, which were used to evaluate potential land subsidence and earth fissures, can be interpreted in other ways. Alternative geologic interpretations, however, should have little if any impact on the evaluation because the stratigraphic and structural boundaries presented in this report correspond with the lithologic changes in the sediments of the aquifer that are most likely to affect the magnitude and extent of compaction.

During this investigation, cooperation was received from many employees of the city of Tucson. The author would like to thank R. Bruce Johnson, Chief Hydrologist; Joseph A. Babcock, Gary L. Hix, Gerald J. Hunsaker, and Lynn Brunsbach of the Tucson Water Planning Division; and Don H. Hadden, Administrator; David J. Swartz, and Marvin S. Sanderson of the Tucson Water-Resources Division. The author is also especially grateful to Herbert H. Schumann, B. L. Wallace, Calum A. Babcock, and Melvin A. Cuff of the U.S. Geological Survey for their advice and support.

The mountains surrounding Avra Valley consist of igneous, metamorphic, and isolated sedimentary rocks of Precambrian to Tertiary age (Fig. 2) that generally yield only small to moderate quantities of water to wells and springs along the margins of the basin. Withdrawal of water from the rocks of the mountains probably will result in little or no compaction. The valley floor is underlain by unconsolidated to indurated sedimentary deposits of Tertiary and Quaternary age (Figs. 2 and 3) that yield small to large quantities of water to wells within the basin. Withdrawal of water from some of these deposits may result in moderate to large amounts of aquifer compaction.

Major sedimentary units in Avra Valley are the Pantano Formation of Oligocene age, the Tinaja beds (vertical sequence of) Miocene and Pliocene age, and the Fort Lowell Formation of Pleistocene age (Davidson, 1972; Allen, 1981; Anderson, 1982a, 1982b). The Pantano Formation consists of conglomerate, sandstone, mudstone, and gypsiferous mudstone. The Tinaja beds consist of deposits ranging from gravel and conglomerate to gypsiferous and anhydritic clayey silt and mudstone. The Fort Lowell Formation is made up of gravel, sand, and clayey silt. The Tinaja beds are subdivided into lower, middle, and upper units in the subsurface. The lower unit consists mainly of silty sand, gravel, and conglomerate, the middle unit mainly of gypsiferous and anhydritic clayey silt and mudstone, and the upper unit of green to clayey silt.

The Pantano Formation, lower Tinaja beds, and middle Tinaja beds consist largely of moderately indurated to indurated deposits that may be largely of unconsolidated to poorly indurated deposits that may, in places, be greatly susceptible to compaction where saturated. The deposits may, in places, be susceptible to compaction; however, their lithologic properties indicate that they are far less prone to compaction than the overlying deposits of the upper Tinaja beds and Fort Lowell Formation.

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The potential for localized differential land subsidence and earth fissures is greatest where saturated fine-grained deposits of the upper Tinaja beds and Fort Lowell Formation vertically buried faults or cones irregularities in the bedrock. The potential also may be great where the saturated sediments of the upper Tinaja beds and Fort Lowell Formation change abruptly from mostly coarse grained to fine grained in the subsurface. Aquifer compaction results in land subsidence, which is the sinking or settlement of the land surface (Holt and others, 1972). Unequal sinking or settlement of the land surface between adjacent areas is called **differential land subsidence** and may be localized or regional in nature. Earth fissures are narrow, vertical fissural breaks that form in alluvial deposits; those that form as a result of localized differential land subsidence are sometimes referred to as **subsidence fissures** (Schumann and Holand, 1970; Jachens and Holter, 1973). Subsidence fissures that show vertical offset have been referred to as **faults** (Jachens and Holter, 1973). Fissures that are caused by flowing water from wide gully-like depressions called **gullies** (Kam, 1963).

Unconsolidated to poorly indurated sediments undergo compaction as a result of a variety of natural phenomena. Natural compaction results mainly from the weight of overlying sediments; however, other natural phenomena that press on or drain the sediments, such as earth tides and occasional stress from seismic activity, may also cause compaction. Natural compaction of such sedimentary materials is greatly accelerated by the withdrawal of ground water. The lowering of the ground-water table or a decrease in artesian head results in the rearrangement and closer packing of the coarse and eventually incompressible aquifer grains and the compression and partial deswelling of compressible fine-grained aquifer materials (Davidson, 1972). An aquifer is most susceptible to compaction where it is rich in clay but permeable enough so that substantial quantities of water can be withdrawn (Davidson, 1972).

Aquifer compaction consists of **elastic** and **inelastic** components (Holand and others, 1972). The elastic component is recoverable and results in aquifer expansion when a rise in water level or an increase in artesian head occurs. The inelastic component is nonrecoverable and results in permanent compaction of the aquifer. In clay- and silt-rich fine-grained aquifer materials, the inelastic component is many times larger than the elastic component. In sand- and gravel-rich coarse-grained materials, however, the inelastic component may be small compared to the elastic component. The elastic component occurs mainly during water-level decline, whereas the inelastic component may occur at a slow rate (Holand and others, 1972). Inelastic compaction of an aquifer may lag the water-level decline or decrease in artesian head by as much as several years (Holt, 1973). The time lag is caused by slow drainage of water from clay- to coarse-grained beds. The nature of the time lag is dependent on clay-bed thickness, permeability, and pore pressure.

EXPLANATION OF TERMS AND PROCESSES

In this report, an **aquifer** is defined as a body of sedimentary materials that is sufficiently permeable to conduct ground water and to yield economically significant quantities of water to wells and springs (Bates and Jackson, 1980). **Aquifer compaction** is the decrease in thickness of an aquifer that is caused by the withdrawal of water and resultant reduction in size of intergranular spaces within compressible aquifer deposits (Holand and others, 1972). Aquifer compaction results in **land subsidence**, which is the sinking or settlement of the land surface (Holt and others, 1972). Unequal sinking or settlement of the land surface between adjacent areas is called **differential land subsidence** and may be localized or regional in nature. Earth fissures are narrow, vertical fissural breaks that form in alluvial deposits; those that form as a result of localized differential land subsidence are sometimes referred to as **subsidence fissures** (Schumann and Holand, 1970; Jachens and Holter, 1973). Subsidence fissures that show vertical offset have been referred to as **faults** (Jachens and Holter, 1973). Fissures that are caused by flowing water from wide gully-like depressions called **gullies** (Kam, 1963).

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The difference between aquifer compaction and land subsidence can be clarified by briefly describing how they are measured. **Aquifer compaction** is determined by measuring the distance between the land surface and the bottom of a well that may only partially penetrate the aquifer; compaction equals the amount of land subsidence measured by measuring land-surface points of established elevations; subsidence that is tens to hundreds of feet across; fissure segments are generally tens of feet deep (Pattany, 1961; Holt and Notts, 1982; Anderson, 1973). Fissures that accompany water-level decline, aquifer compaction, and land subsidence generally form arcuate to linear in extension patterns that are hundreds to thousands of feet in length. Fissure segments may be hundreds of feet deep (Holter and Davis, 1976; Holter, 1977; Anderson, 1973). Subsequent erosion and enlargement of earth fissures by flowing water result in the formation of fissure gullies; gullying is often dramatic after periods of heavy precipitation. Sediment that is eroded from near the surface travels downward and is deposited at depth in fissure cavities (Holter, 1977). Thus, the ultimate size of a fissure gully is dependent on the amount of sediment that is eroded from near the surface. Fissure gullies that are generally resistant to deformation related to ground-water withdrawal. Differential compaction of the aquifer materials may cause the land surface to band areas prominent bedrock features; the accompanying terrain may result in fissuring. Subsidence fissures commonly overlie shallowly buried fault scars or cones irregularities in the bedrock; those that form above burial fault scars may show vertical offset (Catto, 1981; Schumann and Holand, 1970; Holter and others, 1973). Fissures that are caused by flowing water from wide gully-like depressions called **gullies** (Kam, 1963).

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Some earth fissures appear to form near the land surface and deeper with time. Others may initially form at depth and propagate upward (Holt, 1972; Holter, 1977). Fissures initially appear at the land surface as segmented arcuate to linear narrow cracks, and segments commonly form an arcuate or polygonal pattern (Holter, 1977). Fissures that accompany water-level decline, aquifer compaction, and land subsidence generally form arcuate to linear in extension patterns that are hundreds to thousands of feet in length. Fissure segments may be hundreds of feet deep (Holter and Davis, 1976; Holter, 1977; Anderson, 1973). Subsequent erosion and enlargement of earth fissures by flowing water result in the formation of fissure gullies; gullying is often dramatic after periods of heavy precipitation. Sediment that is eroded from near the surface travels downward and is deposited at depth in fissure cavities (Holter, 1977). Thus, the ultimate size of a fissure gully is dependent on the amount of sediment that is eroded from near the surface. Fissure gullies that are generally resistant to deformation related to ground-water withdrawal. Differential compaction of the aquifer materials may cause the land surface to band areas prominent bedrock features; the accompanying terrain may result in fissuring. Subsidence fissures commonly overlie shallowly buried fault scars or cones irregularities in the bedrock; those that form above burial fault scars may show vertical offset (Catto, 1981; Schumann and Holand, 1970; Holter and others, 1973). Fissures that are caused by flowing water from wide gully-like depressions called **gullies** (Kam, 1963).

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POTENTIAL FOR AQUIFER COMPACTION, LAND SUBSIDENCE, AND EARTH FISSURES IN AVRA VALLEY, PIMA AND PINAL COUNTIES, ARIZONA

BY
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