

New panel looks at why underground water is disappearing east of Interstate 95

By REX SPRINGSTON Richmond Times-Dispatch | Posted: Tuesday, August 18, 2015 11:45 pm

Underground water is disappearing east of Interstate 95, and problems could start showing up in a few years in parts of the Richmond area, an expert said Tuesday.

Details about the decades-old groundwater decline emerged at the first meeting of a new panel that's looking for ways to address the problem.

The General Assembly created the panel, the Eastern Virginia Groundwater Management Advisory Committee, this past winter. The group will meet well into 2017 and will present recommendations to the 2018 General Assembly.

"Solutions take time," said Scott Kudlas, the state Department of Environmental Quality's water-supply director, after the meeting. "We've started the conversation that needs to happen."

Groundwater is the main source of water east of I-95, and most of that water comes from the Potomac aquifer. That's a huge reservoir of water that slowly moves, generally to the east, in a layer of sand and gravel that begins near I-95 and lies between layers of clay. The aquifer is shallowest near I-95 and becomes deeper as it nears the coast.

Because the aquifer is relatively shallow in the Richmond area, problems — such as wells running dry or industries finding insufficient water for future needs — could start surfacing within the next few years in places just east of I-95, such as eastern Hanover and Henrico counties, Kudlas said.

The groundwater panel will be looking at potential ways to reduce some of the demand for the water, including building desalinization plants, reusing treated water from sewage plants and increasing conservation efforts.

"We've got to figure out how we are going to manage water differently," said DEQ Director David Paylor.

Users such as industries, local governments and big farms withdraw about 90 million gallons of groundwater a day east of I-95 — an area known as the coastal plain — because the water there has historically been plentiful and cheap, requiring little purification.

Homeowners' wells use about an additional 38 million gallons a day.

Virginia is using groundwater in that area faster than it is being replaced, and groundwater levels are dropping.

“It’s a chronic issue. It’s something that needs to be addressed,” said panel member Dennis H. Treacy, a Smithfield Foods executive. Addressing it now is “better than waiting until there’s a crisis.”

East of I-95, you need a DEQ permit to take more than 300,000 gallons a month. The agency has been working with some water users in recent years to decrease the amount of water they are allowed.

In most localities, water won’t run out anytime soon, but withdrawals are pulling water from the Chesapeake Bay, making groundwater salty in parts of eastern Virginia, experts say.

The 24-member groundwater panel met at the DEQ’s regional office in Glen Allen.

The panel includes representatives from business, home building, farming, conservation interests, academia and local, state and federal governments.