

Uptick in Well Permits Raise Groundwater Concerns in County

By William Meiners
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Residents and well drillers alike are raising some recent alarms about areas with shrinking groundwater throughout Gratiot County.

"We've seen an uptick in replacement well permits that have been applied for, especially in Wheeler, Lafayette, and Hamilton townships," said Lonnie Smith, environmental health supervisor at the Mid-Michigan District Health Department. "We've had these issues here in the past with large-quantity withdrawal wells lowering the aquifers and causing issues with residential, shallower wells."

Smith defines "large-quantity withdrawal wells" as one with a pumping capacity greater than 70 gallons per minute. "These are typically, and especially in Gratiot County, agricultural wells, irrigation wells, or CAFO [concentrated animal feeding operation] wells for large dairy farms."

Michael Oberlitner, a third generation water well driller, has seen a lot of things in a half century in the drilling business. In 1986, when the dam blew out at Rainbow Lake and the lake rose two or three feet, all the wells started flowing. But he admits that some of the recent groundwater woes has him and other drillers scratching their heads.

"Drillers always notice a seasonal variation," said Oberlitner. "We've got some interference with irrigation wells, that's kind of a given. If you live near one and you have an old well, you're going to have some problems."

Oberlitner explained that irrigation wells create a "cone of depression," similar to a funnel. "The water drops near the well really fast, and then the cone keeps getting wider and spreading," he said. "But once they turn the pumps off, the cone flattens back out."

Though Oberlitner does not attribute the groundwater concerns to one distinct

thing. "I can't say there's a dairy farmer that's guilty or an irrigator that's guilty," he said, noting a few homes on Bagley Road, south of Washington, a few years ago where "water levels dropped over 25 feet" without an irrigation well within several miles.

Oberlitner has not sought out new clients in more than 20 years, aside from an occasional direct referral, say the grandson of someone he knows. Though in some of the worst-case scenarios, he fears people living on a fixed income will have to invest \$10,000 to set a pump farther down in the ground.

"Ten years ago, in 2012, we went through the same situation," Smith said. "We received permit requests for dozens of wells in that area of Gratiot County."

Most of those wells, Smith reported, were redrilled with deeper wells. For the most part, those deepened wells seem to be working fine now. "We've been watching the numbers like we do every year," he said. "Kind of waiting for the other shoe to fall."

Ideally, nature kicks in. "I think we're going to see a change when the seasonal rain picks up," Oberlitner said. "That's when the ponds and streams refill and the irrigation wells kick off."

Smith cautiously echoes Oberlitner on that point. "Nature normally takes its course," he said. "It all depends on the actual depth of the well that's gone dry. Though that could still be an issue in the long term."

Although Smith's office handles the permit process, they are not involved with any resolution processes. That's the responsibility of the Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE). If a resident believes their water well has somehow been tapped by a nearby "large-quantity withdrawal well," EGLE can take them through the complaint process.

Oberlitner does believe some farmers have stepped up "converting some of the



Michael Oberlitner, a third generation water well driller, has seen a lot of things in a half century in the business. A recent lack of groundwater, however, has him and some other drillers in the area concerned.

old two-inch wells" that his grandfather may have built into deeper wells. Still, any well pumping more than 75 gallons per minute, he said, is supposed to be recorded and reported to the state.

Though it could be attributed to something an old farmer once told Oberlitner. "He said, 'water is the cheapest servant out there. Open the water faucet and the water runs. My tiles work 24 hours a day.' I think that's part of the blend," Oberlitner said.

"Everything is being tiled and drained."

With ditches dug deeper, woodlots being cut down, and "progress" overrunning nature, Oberlitner believes "we're not getting any recharge of surface waters going back" to slowly percolate the aquifers in the immediate area.

It's some heavy stuff on the groundwater front, but something for everyone from farmers to homeowners, well drillers to state officials to keep their eyes on.