EFFECTS OF HUMAN ACTIVITIES ON THE INTERACTION OF GROUND WATER AND SURFACE WATER

Human activities commonly affect the distribution, quantity, and chemical quality of water resources. The range in human activities that affect the interaction of ground water and surface water is broad. The following discussion does not provide an exhaustive survey of all human effects but emphasizes those that are relatively widespread. To provide an indication of the extent to which humans affect the water resources of virtually all landscapes, some of the most relevant structures and features related to human activities are superimposed on various parts of the conceptual landscape (Figure 25).

The effects of human activities on the quantity and quality of water resources are felt over a wide range of space and time scales. In the following discussion, "short term" implies time scales from hours to a few weeks or months, and "long term" may range from years to decades. "Local scale" implies distances from a few feet to a few thousand feet and areas as large as a few square miles, and "subregional and regional scales" range from tens to thousands of square miles. The terms point source and nonpoint source with respect to discussions of contamination are used often; therefore, a brief discussion of the meaning of these terms is presented in Box M.

Agricultural Development

Agriculture has been the cause of significant modification of landscapes throughout the world. Tillage of land changes the infiltration and runoff characteristics of the land surface, which affects recharge to ground water, delivery of water and sediment to surface-water bodies, and evapotranspiration. All of these processes either directly or indirectly affect the interaction of ground water and surface water. Agriculturalists are aware of the substantial negative effects of agriculture on water resources and have developed methods to alleviate some of these effects. For example, tillage practices have been modified to maximize retention of water in soils and to minimize erosion of soil from the land into surface-water bodies. Two activities related to agriculture that are particularly relevant to the interaction of ground water and surface water are irrigation and application of chemicals to cropland.

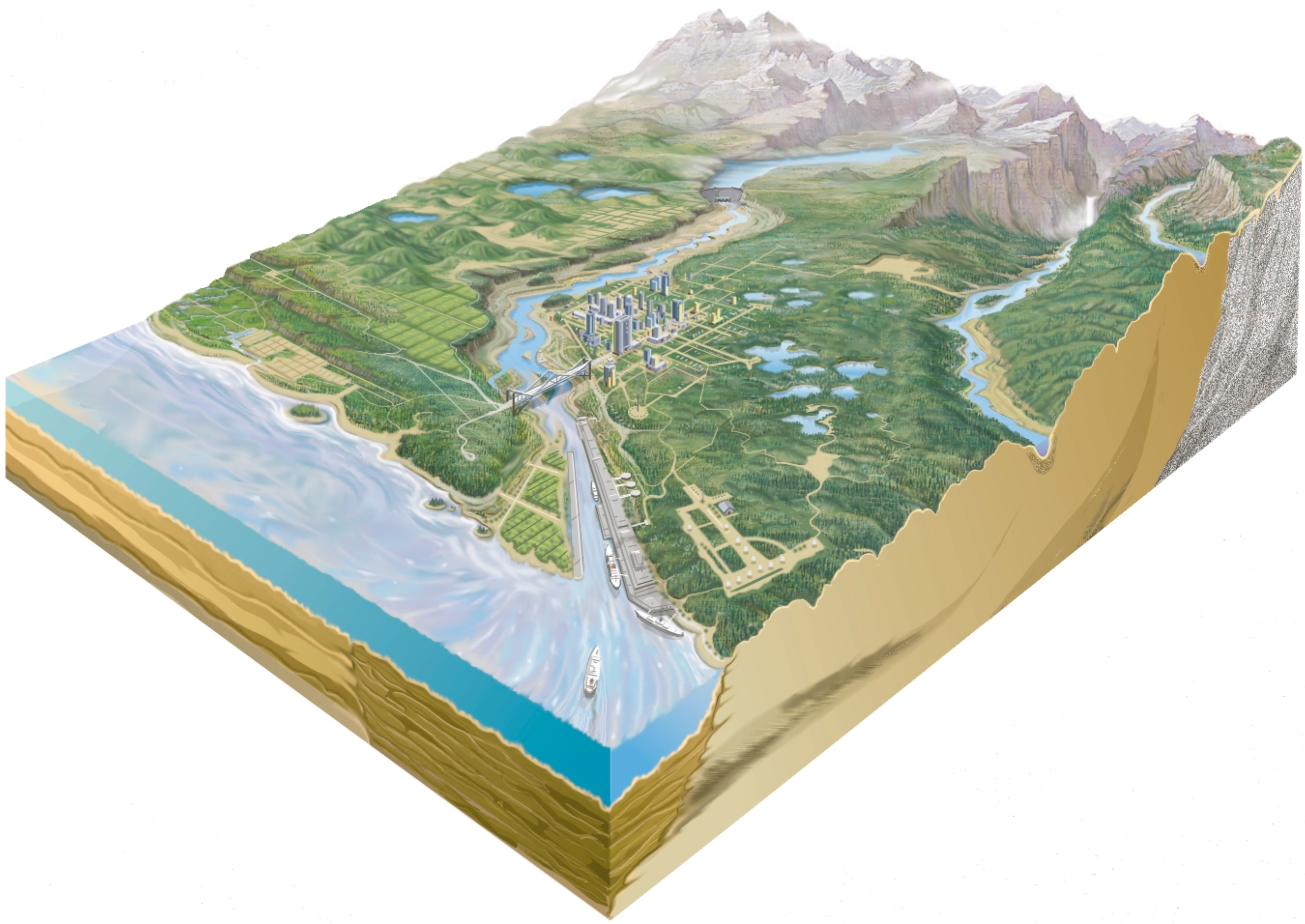


Figure 25. ***Human activities and structures, as depicted by the distribution of various examples in the conceptual landscape, affect the interaction of ground water and surface water in all types of landscapes.***

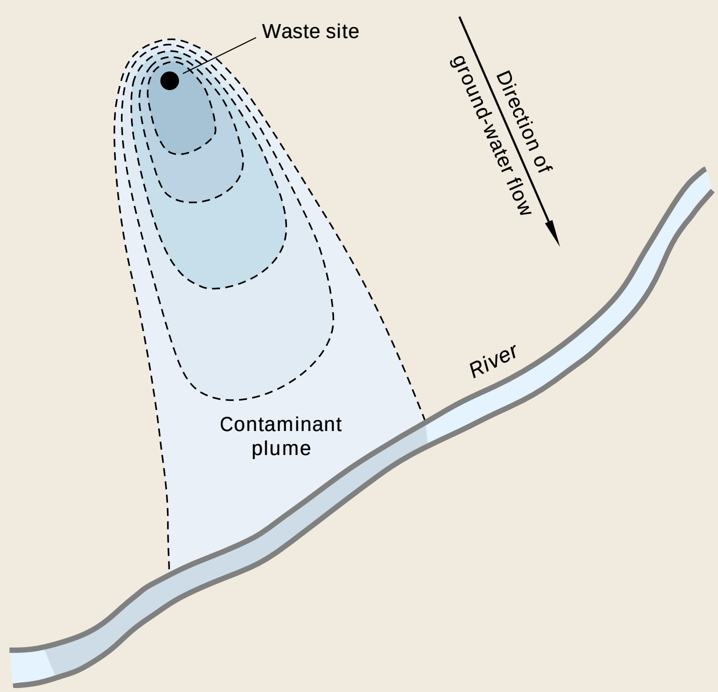
Point and Nonpoint Sources of Contaminants

Contaminants may be present in water or in air as a result of natural processes or through mechanisms of displacement and dispersal related to human activities. Contaminants from point sources discharge either into ground water or surface water through an area that is small relative to the area or volume of the receiving water body. Examples of point sources include discharge from sewage-treatment plants, leakage from gasoline storage tanks, and seepage from landfills (Figure M–1).

Nonpoint sources of contaminants introduce contaminants to the environment across areas that are large compared to point sources, or nonpoint sources may consist of multiple, closely spaced point sources. A nonpoint source of contamination that can be present anywhere, and affect large areas, is deposition from the atmosphere, both by precipitation (wet deposition) or by dry fallout (dry deposition). Agricultural fields, in aggregate, represent large areas through which fertilizers and pesticides can be released to the environment.

The differentiation between point and nonpoint sources of contamination is arbitrary to some extent and may depend in part on the scale at which a problem is considered. For example, emissions from a single smokestack is a point source, but these emissions may be meaningless in a regional analysis of air pollution. However, a fairly even distribution of tens or hundreds of smokestacks might be considered as a nonpoint source. As another example, houses in suburban areas that do not have a combined sewer system have individual septic tanks. At the local scale, each septic tank may be considered as point source of contamination to shallow ground water. At the regional scale, however, the combined contamination of ground water from all the septic tanks in a suburban area may be considered a nonpoint source of contamination to a surface-water body.

Figure M–1. The transport of contamination from a point source by ground water can cause contamination of surface water, as well as extensive contamination of ground water.



IRRIGATION SYSTEMS

Surface-water irrigation systems represent some of the largest integrated engineering works undertaken by humans. The number of these systems greatly increased in the western United States in the late 1840s. In addition to dams on streams, surface-water irrigation systems include (1) a complex network of canals of varying size and carrying capacity that transport water, in many cases for a considerable distance, from a surface-water source to individual fields, and (2) a drainage system to carry away water not used by plants that may be as extensive and complex as the supply system. The drainage system may include underground tile drains. Many irrigation systems that initially used only surface water now also use ground water. The pumped ground water commonly is used directly as irrigation water, but in some cases the water is distributed through the system of canals.

Average quantities of applied water range from several inches to 20 or more inches of water per year, depending on local conditions, over the entire area of crops. In many irrigated areas, about 75 to 85 percent of the applied water is lost to evapotranspiration and retained in the crops (referred to as consumptive use). The remainder of the water either infiltrates through the soil zone to recharge ground water or it returns to a local surface-water body through the drainage system (referred to as irrigation return flow). The quantity of irrigation water that recharges ground water usually is large relative to recharge from precipitation because large irrigation systems commonly are in regions of low precipitation and low natural recharge. As a result, this large volume of artificial recharge can cause the water table to rise (see Box N), possibly reaching the land surface in some areas and waterlogging the fields. For this reason, drainage systems that maintain the level of the water table below the root zone of the crops, generally 4 to 5 feet below the land surface, are an essential component of some irrigation systems. The permanent rise in the water table that is maintained by continued recharge from irrigation return flow commonly results in an increased outflow of shallow ground water to surface-water bodies downgradient from the irrigated area.

N

Effects of Irrigation Development on the Interaction of Ground Water and Surface Water

Nebraska ranks second among the States with respect to the area of irrigated acreage and the quantity of water used for irrigation. The irrigation water is derived from extensive supply systems that use both surface water and ground water (Figure N–1). Hydrologic conditions in different parts of Nebraska provide a number of examples of the broad-scale effects of irrigation development on the interactions of ground water and surface water. As would be expected, irrigation systems based on surface water are always located near streams. In general, these streams are perennial and (or) have significant flow for at least part of the year. In contrast, irrigation systems based on ground water can be located nearly anywhere that has an adequate ground-water resource. Areas of significant rise and decline in ground-water levels due to irrigation systems are shown in Figure N–2. Ground-water levels rise in some areas irrigated with surface water and decline in some areas irrigated with ground water. Rises in ground-water levels near streams result in increased ground-water inflow to gaining streams or decreased flow from the stream to ground water for losing streams. In some areas, it is possible that a stream that was losing water before development of irrigation could become a gaining stream following irrigation. This effect of surface-water irrigation probably caused the rises in ground-water levels in areas F and G in south-central Nebraska (Figure N–2).

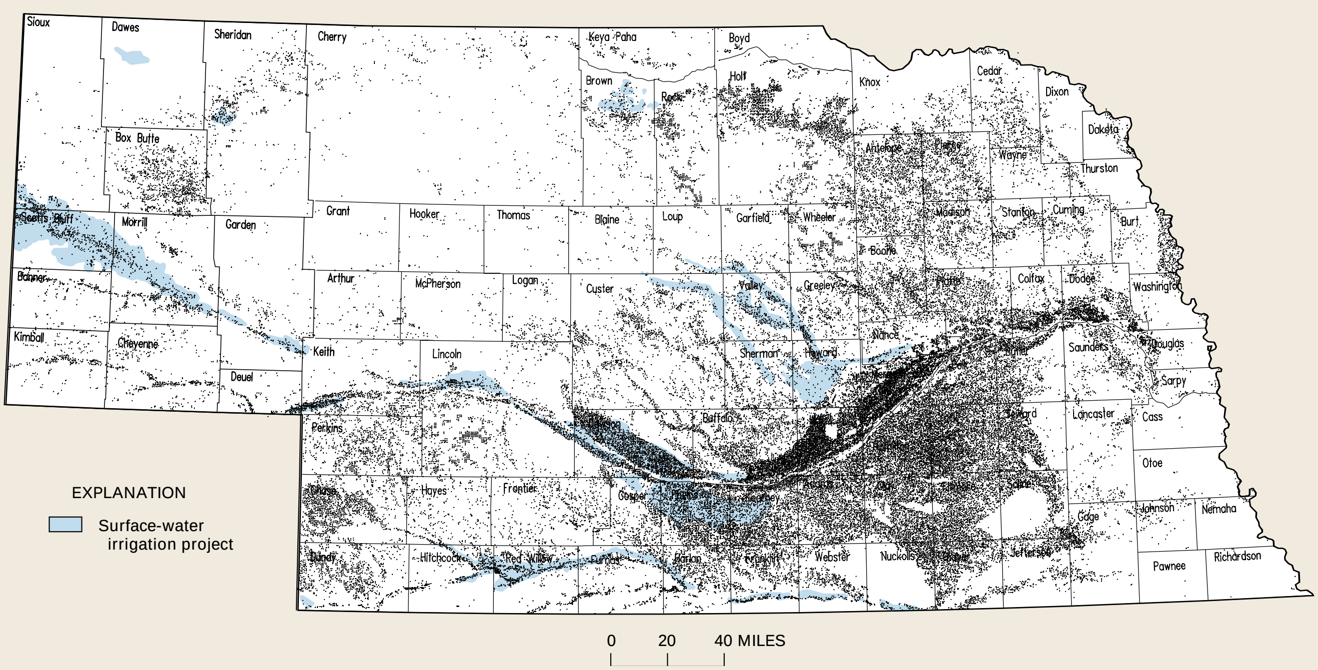


Figure N–1. Nebraska is one of the most extensively irrigated States in the Nation. The irrigation water comes from both ground-water and surface-water sources. Dots are irrigation wells. (Map provided by the University of Nebraska, Conservation and Survey Division.)

Average annual precipitation ranges from less than 15 inches in western Nebraska to more than 30 inches in eastern Nebraska. A large concentration of irrigation wells is present in area E (Figure N–2). The ground-water withdrawals by these wells caused declines in ground-water levels that could not be offset by recharge from precipitation and the presence of nearby flowing streams. In this area, the withdrawals cause decreases in ground-water discharge to the streams and (or) induce flow from the streams to shallow ground water. In contrast, the density of irrigation wells in areas A, B, and C is less than in area E, but water-level declines in these three western areas are similar to area E. The similar decline caused by fewer wells in the west compared to the east is related to less precipitation, less ground-water recharge, and less streamflow available for seepage to ground water.

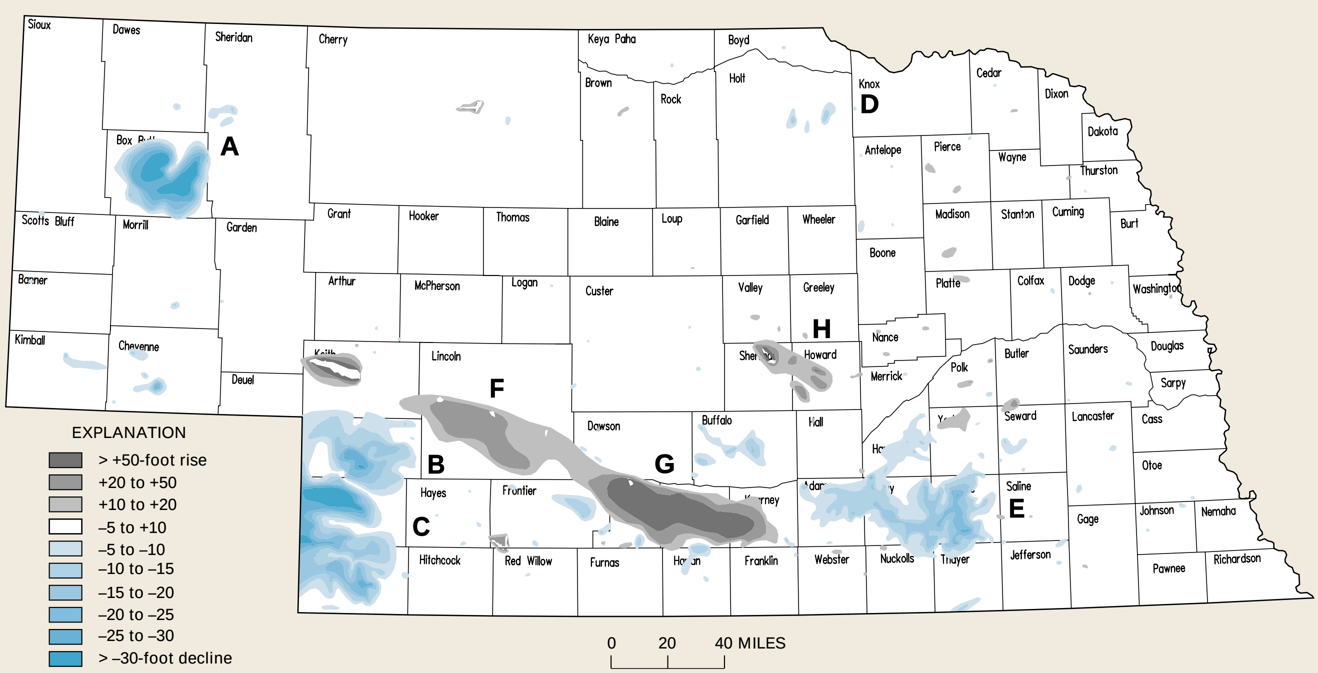


Figure N–2. The use of both ground water and surface water for irrigation in Nebraska has resulted in significant rises and declines of ground-water levels in different parts of the State. (Map provided by the University of Nebraska, Conservation and Survey Division.)

Although early irrigation systems made use of surface water, the development of large-scale sprinkler systems in recent decades has greatly increased the use of ground water for irrigation for several reasons: (1) A system of supply canals is not needed, (2) ground water may be more readily available than surface water, and (3) many types of sprinkler systems can be used on irregular land surfaces; the fields do not have to be as flat as they do for gravity-flow, surface-water irrigation. Whether ground water or surface water was used first to irrigate land, it was not long before water managers recognized that development of either water resource could affect the other. This is particularly true in many alluvial aquifers in arid regions where much of the irrigated land is in valleys.

Significant changes in water quality accompany the movement of water through agricultural fields. The water lost to evapotranspiration is relatively pure; therefore, the chemicals that are left behind precipitate as salts and accumulate in the soil zone. These continue to increase as irrigation continues, resulting in the dissolved-solids concentration in the irrigation return flows being significantly higher in some areas than that in the original irrigation water. To prevent excessive buildup of salts in the soil, irrigation water in excess of the needs of the crops is required to dissolve and flush out the salts and transport them to the ground-water system. Where these dissolved solids reach high concentrations, the artificial recharge from irrigation return flow can result in degradation of the quality of ground water and, ultimately, the surface water into which the ground water discharges.

"Whether ground water or surface water was used first to irrigate land, it was not long before water managers recognized that development of either water resource could affect the other"

USE OF AGRICULTURAL CHEMICALS

Applications of pesticides and fertilizers to cropland can result in significant additions of contaminants to water resources. Some pesticides are only slightly soluble in water and may attach (sorb) to soil particles instead of remaining in solution; these compounds are less likely to cause contamination of ground water. Other pesticides, however, are detected in low, but significant, concentrations in both ground water and surface water. Ammonium, a major component of fertilizer and manure, is very soluble in water, and increased concentrations of nitrate that result from nitrification of ammonium commonly are present in both ground water and surface water associated with agricultural lands (see Box O). In addition to these nonpoint sources of water contamination, point sources of contamination are common in agricultural areas where livestock are concentrated in small areas, such as feedlots. Whether the initial contamination is present in ground water or surface water is somewhat immaterial because the close interaction of the two sometimes results in both being contaminated (see Box P).

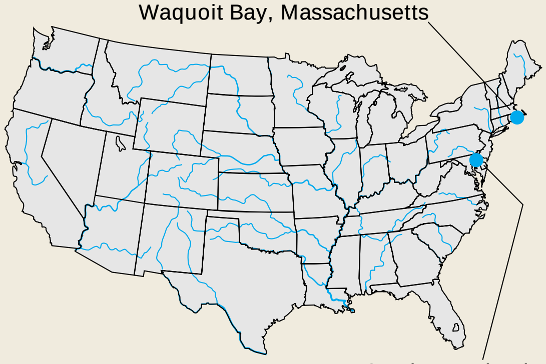
"Whether the initial contamination is present in ground water or surface water is somewhat immaterial because the close interaction of the two sometimes results in both being contaminated"

O

Effects of Nitrogen Use on the Quality of Ground Water and Surface Water

Nitrate contamination of ground water and surface water in the United States is widespread because nitrate is very mobile in the environment. Nitrate concentrations are increasing in much of the Nation's water, but they are particularly high in ground water in the midcontinent region of the United States. Two principal chemical reactions are important to the fate of nitrogen in water: (1) fertilizer ammonium can be nitrified to form nitrate, which is very mobile as a dissolved constituent in shallow ground water, and (2) nitrate can be denitrified to produce nitrogen gas in the presence of chemically reducing conditions if a source of dissolved organic carbon is available.

High concentrations of nitrate can contribute to excessive growth of aquatic plants, depletion of oxygen, fishkills, and general degradation of aquatic habitats. For example, a study of Waquoit Bay in Massachusetts linked the decline in eelgrass beds since 1950 to a progressive increase in nitrate input due to expansion of domestic septic-field developments in the drainage basin (Figure O–1). Loss of eelgrass is a concern because this aquatic plant stabilizes sediment and provides ideal habitat for juvenile fish and other fauna in coastal bays and estuaries. Larger nitrate concentrations supported algal growth that caused turbidity and shading, which contributed to the decline of eelgrass.



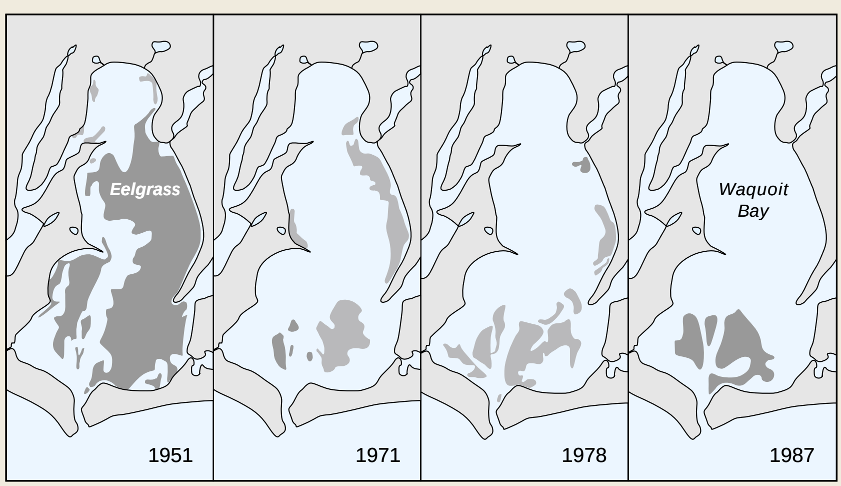


Figure O–1. The areal extent of eelgrass in Waquoit Bay, Massachusetts, decreased markedly between 1951 and 1987 because of increased inputs of nitrogen related to domestic septic-field developments. (Modified from Valiela, I., Foreman, K., LaMontagne, M., Hersh, D., Costa, J., Peckol, P., DeMeo-Andeson, B., D'Avanzo, C., Babione, M., Sham, C.H., Brawley, J., and Lajtha, K., 1992, Couplings of watersheds and coastal waters—Sources and consequences of nutrient enrichment in Waquoit Bay, Massachusetts: Estuaries, v. 15, no. 4, p. 433–457.) (Reprinted by permission of the Estuarine Research Federation.)

Significant denitrification has been found to take place at locations where oxygen is absent or present at very low concentrations and where suitable electron-donor compounds, such as organic carbon, are available. Such locations include the interface of aquifers with silt and clay confining beds and along riparian zones adjacent to streams. For example, in a study on the eastern shore of Maryland, nitrogen isotopes and other environmental tracers were used to show that the degree of denitrification that took place depended on the extent of interaction between ground-water and the chemically reducing sediments near or below the bottom of the Aquia Formation. Two drainage basins were studied: Morgan Creek and Chesterville Branch (Figure O–2). Ground-water discharging beneath both streams had similar nitrate concentration when recharged. Significant denitrification took place in the Morgan Creek basin where a large fraction of local ground-water flow passed through the reducing sediments, which are present at shallow depths (3 to 10 feet) in this area. Evidence for the denitrification included decreases in nitrate concentrations along the flow path to Morgan Creek and enrichment of the ^{15}N isotope. Much less denitrification took place in the Chesterville Branch basin because the top of the reducing sediments are deeper (10 to 20 feet) in this area and a smaller fraction of ground-water flow passed through those sediments.

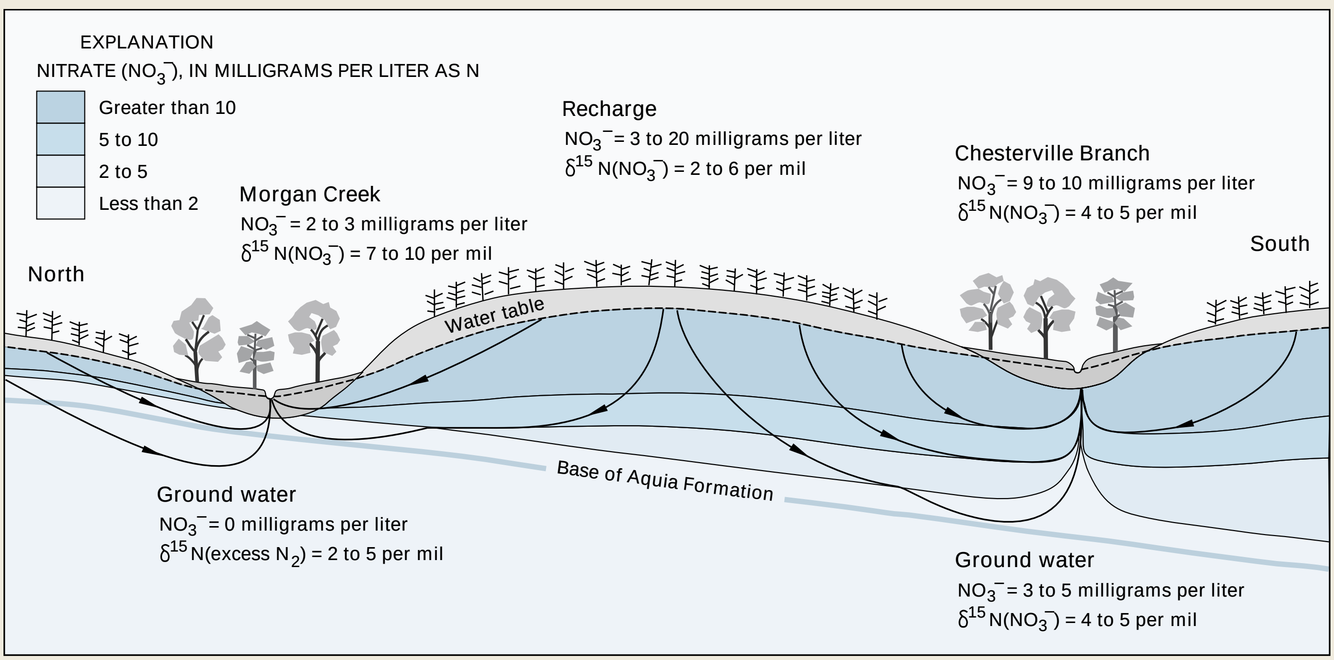


Figure O–2. Denitrification had a greater effect on ground water discharging to Morgan Creek than to Chesterville Branch in Maryland because a larger fraction of the local flow system discharging to Morgan Creek penetrated the reduced calcareous sediments near or below the bottom of the Aquia Formation than the flow system associated with the Chesterville Branch. (Modified from Bolke, J.K., and Denver, J.M., 1995, Combined use of ground-water dating, chemical, and isotopic analyses to resolve the history and fate of nitrate contamination in two agricultural watersheds, Atlantic coastal plain, Maryland: Water Resources Research, v. 31, no. 9, p. 2319–2337.)

P

Effects of Pesticide Application to Agricultural Lands on the Quality of Ground Water and Surface Water

Pesticide contamination of ground water and surface water has become a major environmental issue. Recent studies indicate that pesticides applied to cropland can contaminate the underlying ground water and then move along ground-water flow paths to surface water. In addition, as indicated by the following examples, movement of these pesticides between surface water and ground water can be dynamic in response to factors such as bank storage during periods of high runoff and ground-water withdrawals.

A study of the sources of atrazine, a widely used herbicide detected in the Cedar River and its associated alluvial aquifer in Iowa, indicated that ground water was the major source of atrazine in the river during base-flow conditions. In addition, during periods of high streamflow, surface water containing high concentrations of atrazine moved into the bank sediments and alluvial aquifer, then slowly discharged back to the river as the river level declined. Reversals of flow related to bank storage were documented using data for three sampling periods (Figure P–1). The first sampling (Figure P–1*A*) was before atrazine was applied to cropland, when concentrations in the river and aquifer were relatively low. The second sampling (Figure P–1*B*) was after atrazine was applied to cropland upstream. High streamflow at this time caused the river stage to peak almost 6 feet above its base-flow level, which caused the herbicide to move with the river water into the aquifer. By the third sampling date (Figure P–1*C*), the hydraulic gradient between the river and the alluvial aquifer had reversed again, and atrazine-contaminated water discharged back into the river.

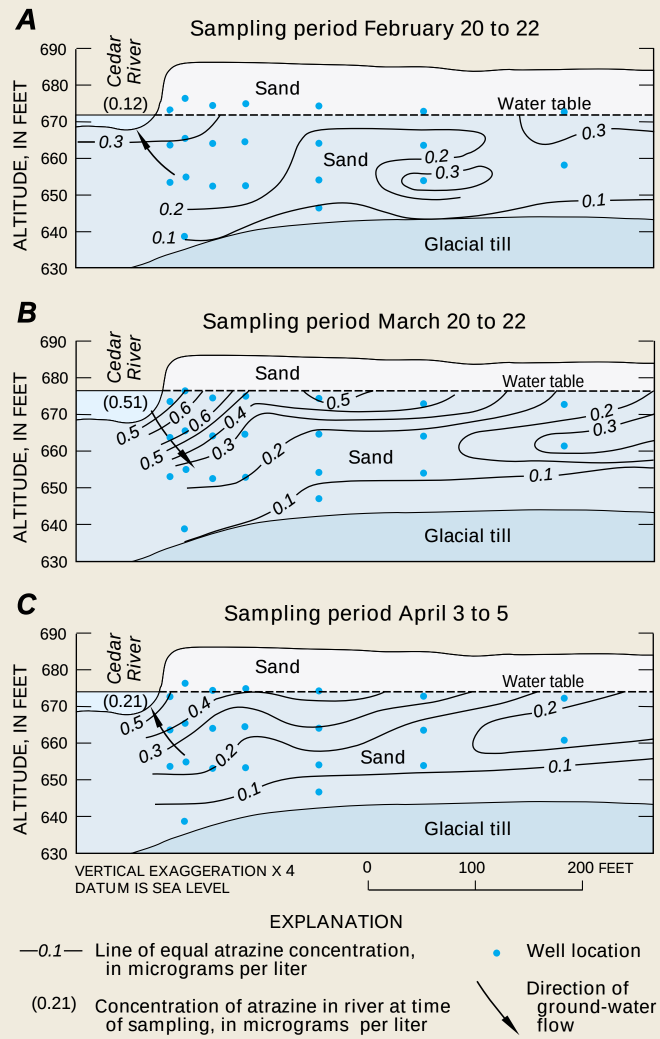
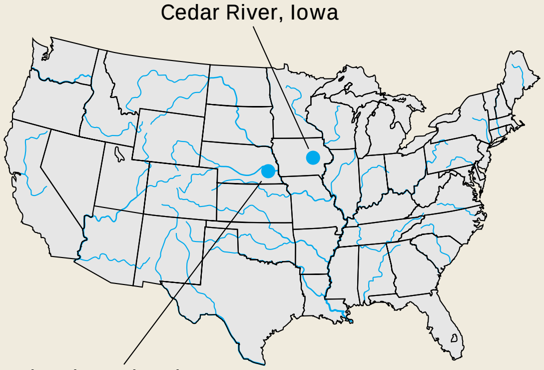


Figure P–1. Concentrations of atrazine increased in the Cedar River in Iowa following applications of the chemical on agricultural areas upstream from a study site. During high streamflow (B), the contaminated river water moved into the alluvial aquifer as bank storage, contaminating ground water. After the river level declined (C), part of the contaminated ground water returned to the river. (Modified from Squillace, P.J., Thurman, E.M., and Furlong, E.T., 1993, Groundwater as a nonpoint source of atrazine and deethylatrazine in a river during base flow conditions: Water Resources Research, v. 29, no. 6, p. 1719–1729.)

In a second study, atrazine was detected in ground water in the alluvial aquifer along the Platte River near Lincoln, Nebraska. Atrazine is not applied in the vicinity of the well field, so it was suspected that ground-water withdrawals at the well field caused contaminated river water to move into the aquifer. To define the source of the atrazine, water samples were collected from monitoring wells located at different distances from the river near the well field. The pattern of concentrations of atrazine in the ground water indicated that peak concentrations of the herbicide showed up sooner in wells close to the river compared to wells farther away (Figure P–2). Peak concentrations of atrazine in ground water were much higher and more distinct during periods of large ground-water withdrawals (July and August) than during periods of much smaller withdrawals (May to early June).



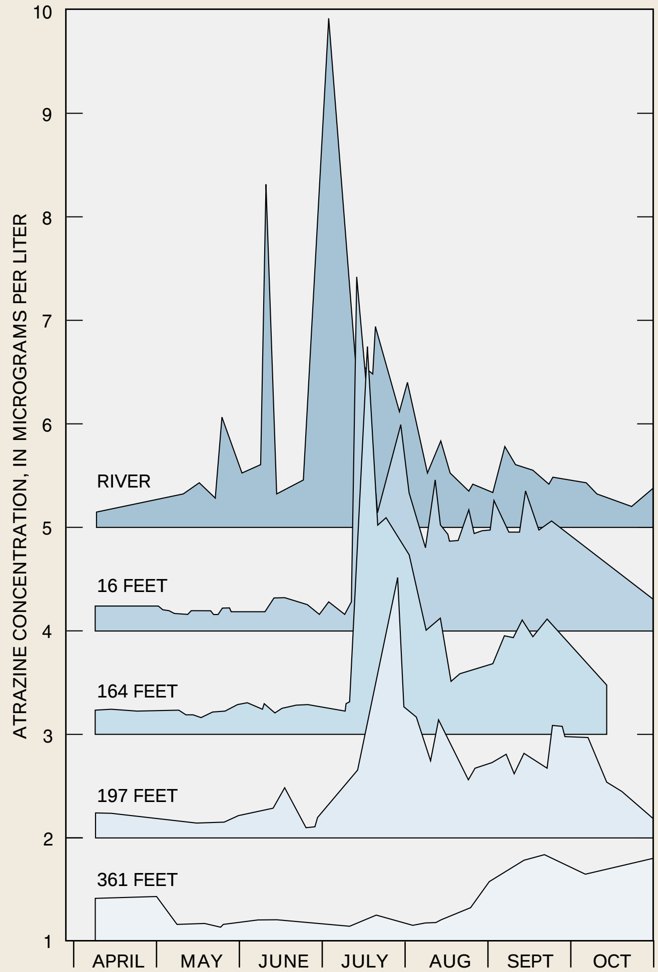


Figure P–2. Pumping of municipal water-supply wells near Lincoln, Nebraska, has induced Platte River water contaminated with atrazine to flow into the aquifer. Distances shown are from river to monitoring well. (Modified from Duncan, D., Pederson, D.T., Shepherd, T.R., and Carr, J.D., 1991, Atrazine used as a tracer of induced recharge: Ground Water Monitoring Review, v. 11, no. 4, p. 144–150.) (Used with permission.)

Urban and Industrial Development

Point sources of contamination to surface-water bodies are an expected side effect of urban development. Examples of point sources include direct discharges from sewage-treatment plants, industrial facilities, and stormwater drains. These facilities and structures commonly add sufficient loads of a variety of contaminants to streams to strongly affect the quality of the stream for long distances downstream. Depending on relative flow magnitudes of the point source and of the stream, discharge from a point source such as a sewage-treatment plant may represent a large percentage of the water in the stream directly downstream from the source. Contaminants in streams can easily affect ground-water quality, especially where streams normally seep to ground water, where ground-water withdrawals induce seepage from the stream, and where floods cause stream water to become bank storage.

Point sources of contamination to ground water can include septic tanks, fluid storage tanks, landfills, and industrial lagoons. If a contaminant is soluble in water and reaches the water table, the contaminant will be transported by the slowly moving ground water. If the source continues to supply the contaminant over a period of time, the distribution of the dissolved contaminant will take a characteristic "plumelike" shape (see Box M). These contaminant plumes commonly discharge into a nearby surface-water body. If the concentration of contaminant is low and the rate of discharge of plume water also is small relative to the volume of the receiving surface-water body, the discharging contaminant plume will have only a small, or perhaps unmeasurable, effect on the quality of the receiving surface-water body. Furthermore, biogeochemical processes may decrease the concentration of the contaminant as it is transported through the shallow ground-water system and the hyporheic zone. On the other hand, if the discharge of the contaminant plume is large or has high concentrations of contaminant, it could significantly affect the quality of the receiving surface-water body.

"Contaminants in streams can easily affect ground-water quality, especially where streams normally seep to ground water, where ground-water withdrawals induce seepage from the stream, and where floods cause stream water to become bank storage"

Drainage of the Land Surface

In landscapes that are relatively flat, have water ponded on the land surface, or have a shallow water table, drainage of land is a common practice preceding agricultural and urban development. Drainage can be accomplished by constructing open ditches or by burying tile drains beneath the land surface. In some glacial terrain underlain by deposits having low permeability, drainage of lakes and wetlands can change the areal distribution of ground-water recharge and discharge, which in turn can result in significant changes in the biota that are present and in the chemical and biological processes that take place in wetlands. Furthermore, these changes can ultimately affect the baseflow to streams, which in turn affects riverine ecosystems. Drainage also alters the water-holding capacity of topographic depressions as well as the surface runoff rates from land having very low slopes. More efficient runoff caused by drainage systems results in decreased recharge to ground water and greater contribution to flooding.

Drainage of the land surface is common in regions having extensive wetlands, such as coastal, riverine, and some glacial-lake landscapes. Construction of artificial drainage systems is extensive in these regions because wetland conditions generally result in deep, rich, organic soils that are much prized for agriculture. In the most extensive artificially drained part of the Nation, the glacial terrain of the upper Midwest, it is estimated that more than 50 percent of the original wetland areas have been destroyed. In Iowa alone, the destruction exceeds 90 percent. Although some wetlands were destroyed by filling, most were destroyed by drainage.

Modifications to River Valleys

CONSTRUCTION OF LEVEES

Levees are built along riverbanks to protect adjacent lands from flooding. These structures commonly are very effective in containing smaller magnitude floods that are likely to occur regularly from year to year. Large floods that occur much less frequently, however, sometimes overtop or breach the levees, resulting in widespread flooding. Flooding of low-lying land is, in a sense, the most visible and extreme example of the interaction of ground water and surface water. During flooding, recharge to ground water is continuous; given sufficient time, the water table may rise to the land surface and completely saturate the shallow aquifer (see Figure 12). Under these conditions, an extended period of drainage from the shallow aquifer takes place after the floodwaters recede. The irony of levees as a flood protection mechanism is that if levees fail during a major flood, the area, depth, and duration of flooding in some areas may be greater than if levees were not present.

CONSTRUCTION OF RESERVOIRS

The primary purpose of reservoirs is to store water for uses such as public water supply, irrigation, flood attentuation, and generation of electric power. Reservoirs also can provide opportunities for recreation and wildlife habitat. Water needs to be stored in reservoirs because streamflow is highly variable, and the times when streamflow is abundant do not necessarily coincide with the times when the water is needed. Streamflow can vary daily in response to individual storms and seasonally in response to variation in weather patterns.

The effects of reservoirs on the interaction of ground water and surface water are greatest near the reservoir and directly downstream from it. Reservoirs can cause a permanent rise in the water table that may extend a considerable distance from the reservoir, because the base level of the stream, to which the ground-water gradients had adjusted, is raised to the higher reservoir levels. Near the dam, reservoirs commonly lose water to shallow ground water, but this water commonly returns to the river as base flow directly downstream from the dam. In addition, reservoirs can cause temporary bank storage at times when reservoir levels are high. In some cases, this temporary storage of surface water in the ground-water system has been found to be a significant factor in reservoir management (see Box Q).

Human-controlled reservoir releases and accumulation of water in storage may cause high flows and low flows to differ considerably in magnitude and timing compared to natural flows. As a result, the environmental conditions in river valleys downstream from a dam may be altered as organisms try to adjust to the modified flow conditions. For example, the movement of water to and from bank storage under controlled conditions would probably be much more regular in timing and magnitude compared to the highly variable natural flow conditions, which probably would lead to less biodiversity in river systems downstream from reservoirs. The few studies that have been made of riverine ecosystems downstream from a reservoir indicate that they are different from the pre-reservoir conditions, but much more needs to be understood about the effects of reservoirs on stream channels and riverine ecosystems downstream from dams.

REMOVAL OF NATURAL VEGETATION

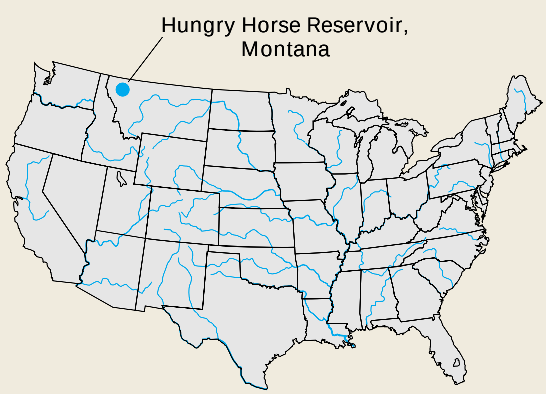
To make land available for agriculture and urban growth, development sometimes involves cutting of forests and removal of riparian vegetation and wetlands. Forests have a significant role in the hydrologic regime of watersheds. Deforestation tends to decrease evapotranspiration, increase storm runoff and soil erosion, and decrease infiltration to ground water and base flow of streams. From the viewpoint of water-resource quality and management, the increase in storm runoff and soil erosion and the decrease in base flow of streams are generally viewed as undesirable.

In the western United States, removal of riparian vegetation has long been thought to result in an increase in streamflow. It commonly is believed that the phreatophytes in alluvial valleys transpire ground water that otherwise would flow to the river and be available for use (see Box R). Some of the important functions of riparian vegetation and riparian wetlands include preservation of aquatic habitat, protection of the land from erosion, flood mitigation, and maintenance of water quality. Destruction of riparian vegetation and wetlands removes the benefits of erosion control and flood mitigation, while altering aquatic habitat and chemical processes that maintain water quality.

Q

Effects of Surface-Water Reservoirs on the Interaction of Ground Water and Surface Water

The increase of water levels in reservoirs causes the surface water to move into bank storage. When water levels in reservoirs are decreased, this bank storage will return to the reservoir. Depending on the size of the reservoir and the magnitude of fluctuation of the water level of the reservoir, the amount of water involved in bank storage can be large. A study of bank storage associated with Hungry Horse Reservoir in Montana, which is part of the Columbia River system, indicated that the amount of water that would return to the reservoir from bank storage after water levels are lowered is large enough that it needs to be considered in the reservoir management plan for the Columbia River system. As a specific example, if the water level of the reservoir is raised 100 feet, held at that level for a year, then lowered 100 feet, the water that would drain back to the reservoir during a year would be equivalent to an additional 3 feet over the reservoir surface. (Information from Simons, W.D., and Rorabaugh, M.I., 1971, Hydrology of Hungry Horse Reservoir, northwestern Montana: U.S. Geological Survey Professional Paper 682.)



R

Effects of the Removal of Flood-Plain Vegetation on the Interaction of Ground Water and Surface Water

In low-lying areas where the water table is close to land surface, such as in flood plains, transpiration directly from ground water can reduce ground-water discharge to surface water and can even cause surface water to recharge ground water (see Figure 7). This process has attracted particular attention in arid areas, where transpiration by phreatophytes on flood plains of western rivers can have a significant effect on streamflows. To assess this effect, a study was done on transpiration by phreatophytes along a reach of the Gila River upstream from San Carlos Reservoir in Arizona. During the first few years of the 10-year study, the natural hydrologic system was monitored using observation wells, streamflow gages, and meteorological instruments. Following this initial monitoring period, the phreatophytes were removed from the flood plain and the effects on streamflow were evaluated. The average effect of vegetation removal over the entire study reach was that the Gila River changed from a continually losing river for most years before clearing to a gaining stream during some months for most years following clearing. Specifically, average monthly values of gain or loss from the stream indicated that before clearing, the river lost water to ground water during all months for most years. After clearing, the river gained ground-water inflow during March through June and during September for most years (Figure R–1).

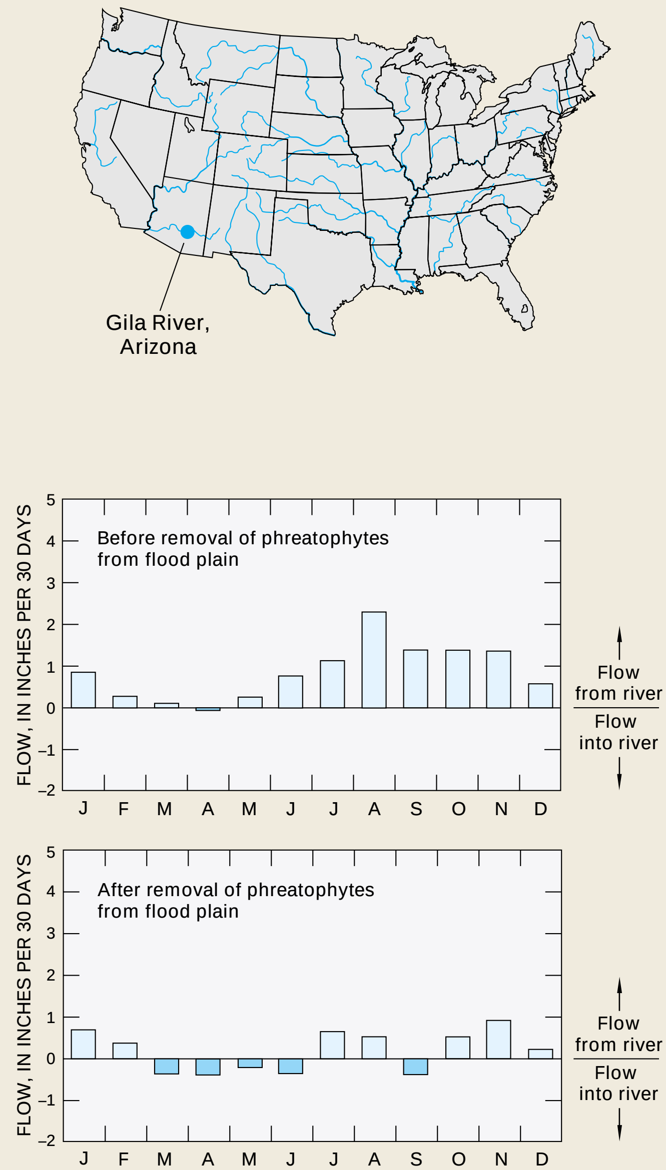


Figure R–1. Removal of phreatophytes from the flood plain along a losing reach of the Gila River in Arizona resulted in the river receiving ground-water inflow during some months of the year. (Modified from Culler, R.C., Hanson, R.L., Myrick, R.M., Turner, R.M., and Kipple, F.P., 1982, Evapotranspiration before and after clearing phreatophytes, Gila River flood plain, Graham County, Arizona: U.S. Geological Professional Paper 655–P.)

Modifications to the Atmosphere

ATMOSPHERIC DEPOSITION

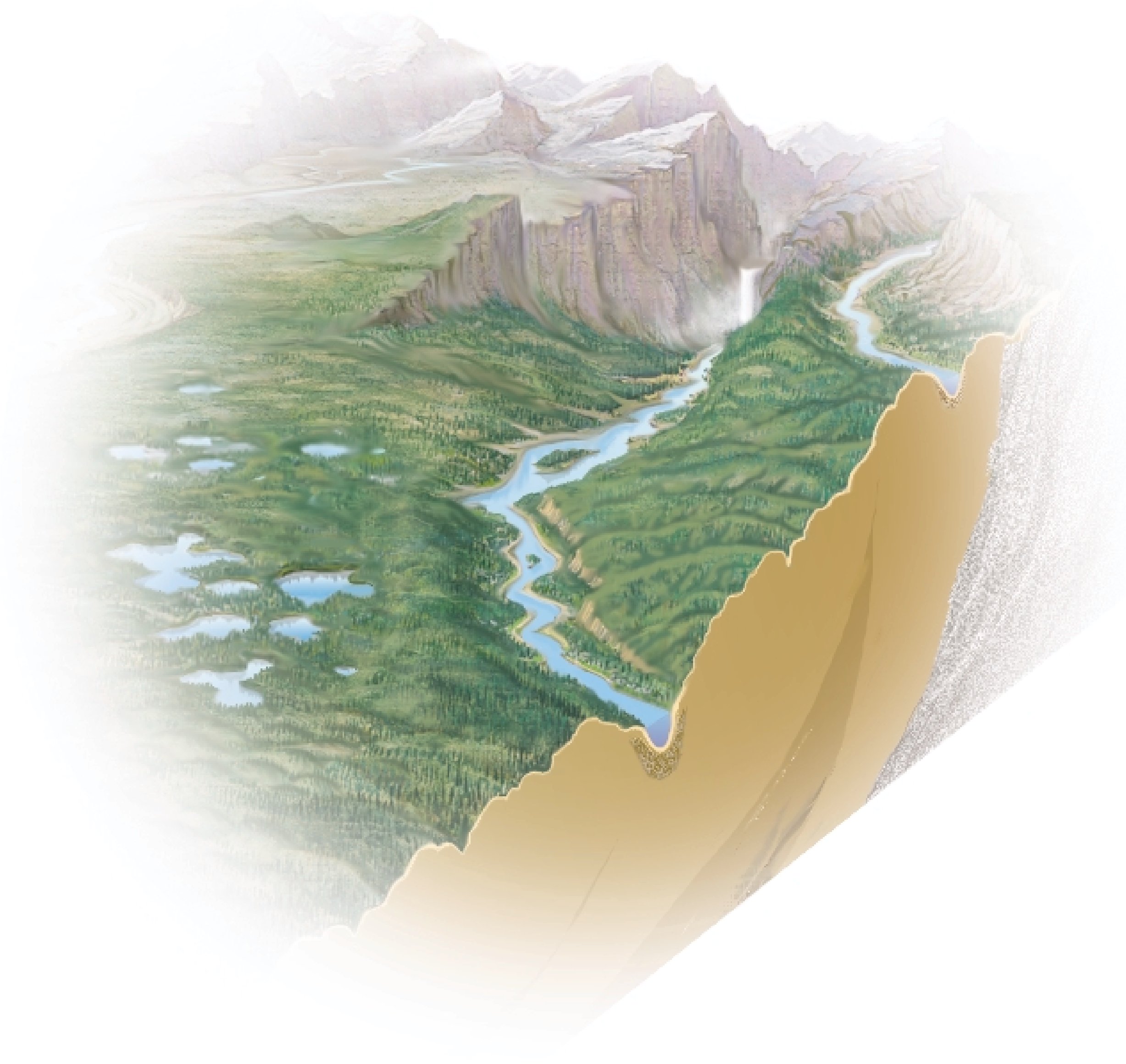
Atmospheric deposition of chemicals, such as sulfate and nitrate, can cause some surface-water bodies to become acidic. Concern about the effects of acidic precipitation on aquatic ecosystems has led to research on the interaction of ground water and surface water, especially in small headwaters catchments. It was clear when the problem was first recognized that surface-water bodies in some environments were highly susceptible to acidic precipitation, whereas in other environments they were not. Research revealed that the interaction of ground water and surface water is important to determining the susceptibility of a surface-water body to acidic precipitation (see Box S). For example, if a surface-water body received a significant inflow of ground water, chemical exchange while the water passed through the subsurface commonly neutralized the acidic water, which can reduce the acidity of the surface water to tolerable levels for aquatic organisms. Conversely, if runoff of acidic precipitation was rapid and involved very little flow through the ground-water system, the surface-water body was highly vulnerable and could become devoid of most aquatic life.

"The interaction of ground water and surface water is important to determining the susceptibility of a surface-water body to acidic precipitation"

GLOBAL WARMING

The concentration of gases, such as carbon dioxide (CO_2) and methane, in the atmosphere has a significant effect on the heat budget of the Earth's surface and the lower atmosphere. The increase in concentration of CO_2 in the atmosphere of about 25 percent since the late 1700s generally is thought to be caused by the increase in burning of fossil fuels. At present, the analysis and prediction of "global warming" and its possible effects on the hydrologic cycle can be described only with great uncertainty. Although the physical behavior of CO_2 and other greenhouse gases is well understood, climate systems are exceedingly complex, and long-term changes in climate are embedded in the natural variability of the present global climate regime.

Surficial aquifers, which supply much of the streamflow nationwide and which contribute flow to lakes, wetlands, and estuaries, are the aquifers most sensitive to seasonal and longer term climatic variation. As a result, the interaction of ground water and surface water also will be sensitive to variability of climate or to changes in climate. However, little attention has been directed at determining the effects of climate change on shallow aquifers and their interaction with surface water, or on planning how this combined resource will be managed if climate changes significantly.



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Effects of Atmospheric Deposition on the Quality of Ground Water and Surface Water

In areas where soils have little capacity to buffer acids in water, acidic precipitation can be a problem because the infiltrating acidic water can increase the solubility of metals, which results in the flushing of high concentrations of dissolved metals into surface water. Increased concentrations of naturally occurring metals such as aluminum may be toxic to aquatic organisms. Studies of watersheds have indicated that the length of subsurface flow paths has an effect on the degree to which acidic water is buffered by flow through the subsurface. For example, studies of watersheds in England have indicated that acidity was higher in streams during storms when more of the subsurface flow moved through the soil rather than through the deeper flow paths (Figure S–1). Moreover, in a study of the effects of acid precipitation on lakes in the Adirondack Mountains of New York, the length of time that water was in contact with deep subsurface materials was the most important factor affecting acidity because contact time determined the amount of buffering that could take place (Figure S–2).

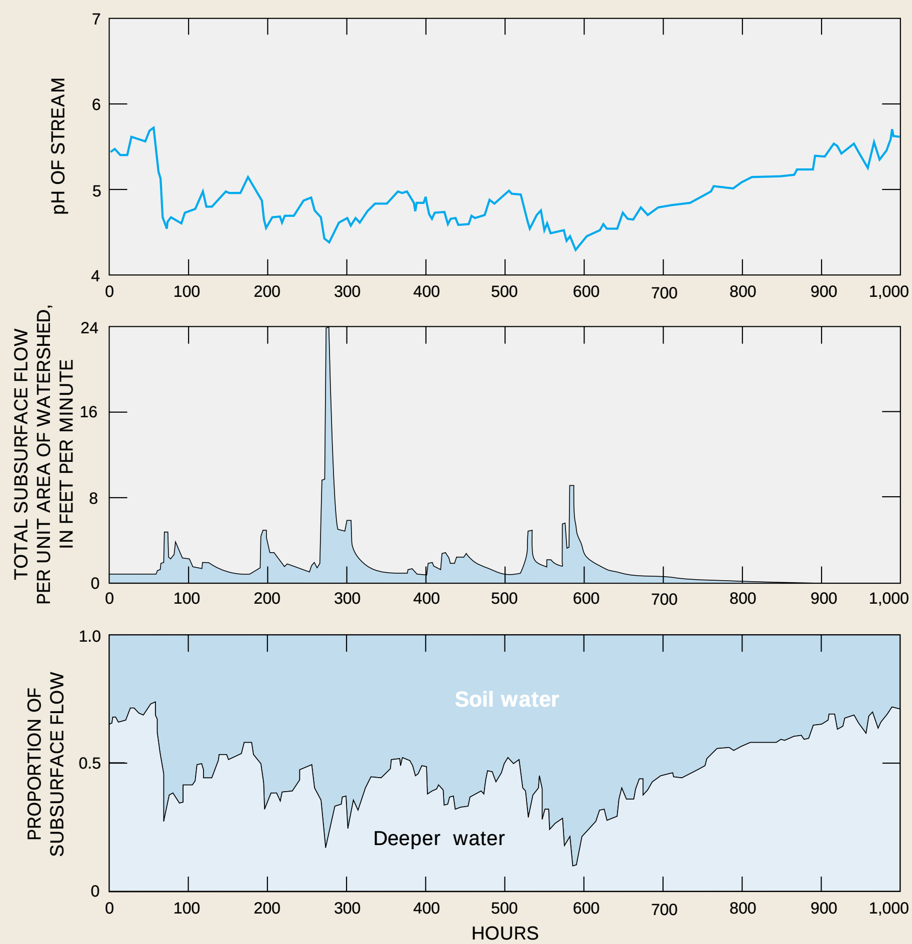

Figure S–1. Acidity is higher (pH is lower) in streams when most of the flow is contributed by shallow soil water because the water has had less time to be neutralized by contact with minerals compared to water that has traversed deeper flow paths. (Modified from Robson, A., Beven, K.J., and Neal, C., 1992, Towards identifying sources of subsurface flow—A comparison of components identified by a physically based runoff model and those determined by chemical mixing techniques: Hydrological Processes, v. 6, p. 199–214.) (Reprinted with permission from John Wiley & Sons Limited.)

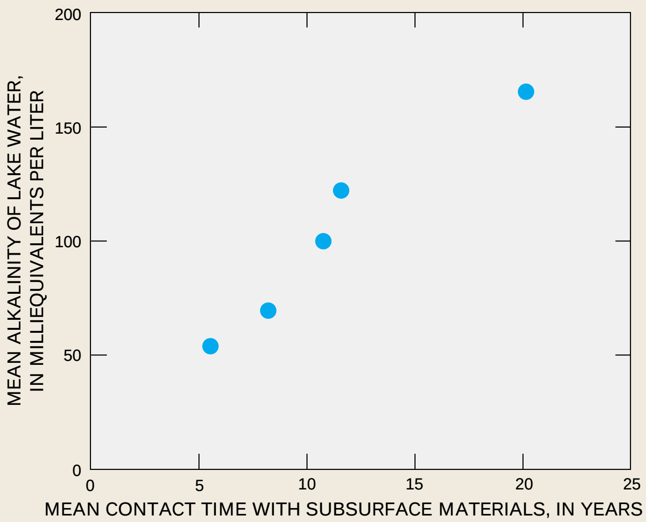

Figure S–2. The longer water is in contact with deep subsurface materials in a watershed, the higher the alkalinity in lakes receiving that water. (Modified from Wolock, D.M., Hornberger, G.M., Beven, K.J., and Campbell, W.G., 1989, The relationship of catchment topography and soil hydraulic characteristics to lake alkalinity in the northeastern United States: Water Resources Research, v. 25, p. 829–837.)