

Inventory of Sierra Valley Wells and Groundwater Quality Conditions

Prepared for

Randy Wilson, Director
Plumas County Planning Department
520 Main Street, Quincy, CA 95971
530-283-7011

and

Sierra Valley Groundwater Management District
Loyalton, CA

By
Burkhard Bohm
Hydrogeologist
CHG lic. #337
Plumas Geo-Hydrology
PO Box 1922, Portola, CA 96122
530-836-2208

Final Report

November 29, 2016

Contents

1. Introduction	3
Background	3
2. Sierra Valley Well Inventory	3
Introduction.....	3
Well inventory	4
3. Inventory of Groundwater Quality in Sierra Valley	10
Background	10
Groundwater chemistry data base	11
Limitations on analysis of time trends	12
Major ion chemistry	13
Geothermal waters.....	14
Water quality parameters of concern	15
Boron	15
Boron time trends in groundwater	16
Nitrate	17
Summary and conclusions.....	20
4. Bibliography	23

1. Introduction

Background

This is a companion report to a larger report summarizing data collection and interpretation in Sierra Valley in 2014/15. The objective is to developing a comprehensive conceptual model of the Sierra Valley hydrologic system. On the long run, this information is needed to develop a comprehensive groundwater resource management plan.

This report encompasses two tasks:

1. A valley-wide well inventory based on well log database obtained from DWR.
2. An inventory of valley-wide groundwater quality data using the DWR historic groundwater chemistry data base.

2. Sierra Valley Well Inventory

Introduction

There are almost 1000 well drillers' reports available for Sierra Valley. The problem is that the well locations are given in the T-R-S system (well number). In other words most of the well locations are indicated only within a one square mile area (5280 by 5280 ft). A small number of well location data (only south of the County line) also include the "tract" (letters A through R), i.e. at best within a 1/16 square mile area (1320 x 1320 ft lot).

Although the entire valley is fairly well covered with wells, aerial coverage by drilling information is rather unevenly distributed. Most wells are located in the northwest and central basin.

Most sections contain several wells, requiring giving screen intervals and total depth (TD) as average depths. With a few exceptions, the wells are all located on private land on the Basin floor area covering parts or all of 11 "townships" (T-R) of the valley floor, an area of about 194 square miles.

A spreadsheet was developed from the well-log tally obtained from Red Bluff and Sacramento DWR offices to organize the data and to extract the well construction data needed.

Well inventory

A comprehensive section-by-section (square mile) well inventory has been prepared using the well log database obtained from DWR. For each section a distribution of well construction has been inventoried, including drilling date, TD, screen interval, and casing diameter.

A total of 956 wells are located within the jurisdictional boundaries of the SVGMD. Of these more than two-thirds (670 wells) are located in Plumas County and less than one-third (286 wells) in Sierra County. Two schematic maps have been prepared indicating how many wells were drilled in each one-square mile section. The second map shows the distribution of wells that have been drilled into bedrock. Most wells have been drilled in the northwest (T23N/R14E).

Based on the well-use table almost three-quarters of Sierra Valley wells are used for residential water supply followed by agricultural irrigation wells (6 percent).

Table 2-1 Well use in Sierra Valley.

Table of well use in Sierra Valley				
type of use	number of wells			
domestic	636	74.3%		DOM
irrigation	53	6.2%		IRR
monitoring	42	4.9%		MON
stock	22	2.6%		STK
other	19	2.2%		OTH
public	19	2.2%		PUB
exploration & testing	26	3.0%		EXP & TES
destroyed	12	1.4%		DES
unknown	12	1.4%		UNK
unused	10	1.2%		Unused
industrial	4	0.5%		IND
municipal	1	0.1%		MUN
total	856	100.0%		

The deepest wells (to almost 1600 ft) are irrigation wells (Chart-3); followed by residential wells (1100 ft). More than one-half (54%) of wells drilled in Sierra Valley are less than 200 ft deep and about one-tenth (12%) of wells are more than 500 ft deep (Chart 4).

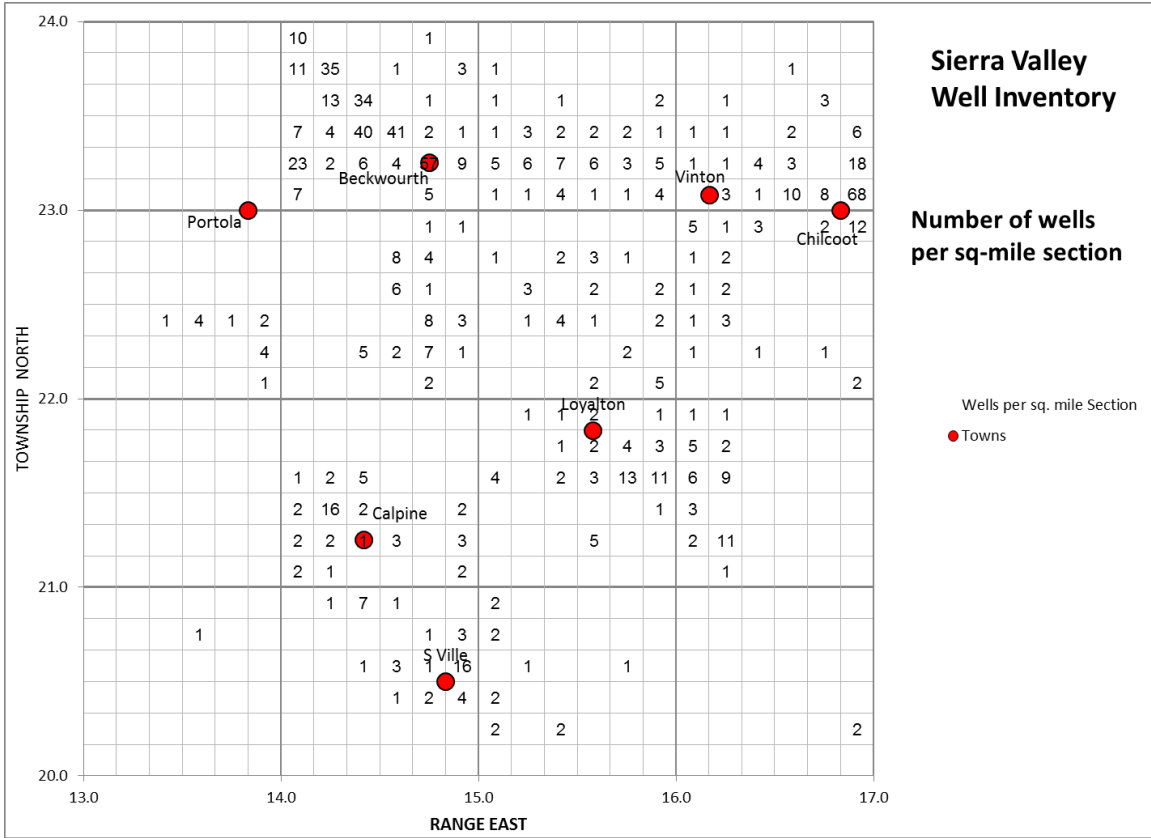
Well casing diameter is telling about the use of wells and their expected yield. Among the 512 wells listed in the casing diameter table (only wells for which casing diameters are given), 61% are six inch diameter wells, which are typically residential wells. Diameters greater than six inches are typical for industrial, municipal, public and irrigation wells constitute about 20%. The remaining wells with diameters smaller than 6 inches are probably older wells (given the “odd” diameters which have not been used

since more than 40 (?) years. Exceptions maybe the 2-inch wells which are probably more recently installed monitoring wells (piezometers).

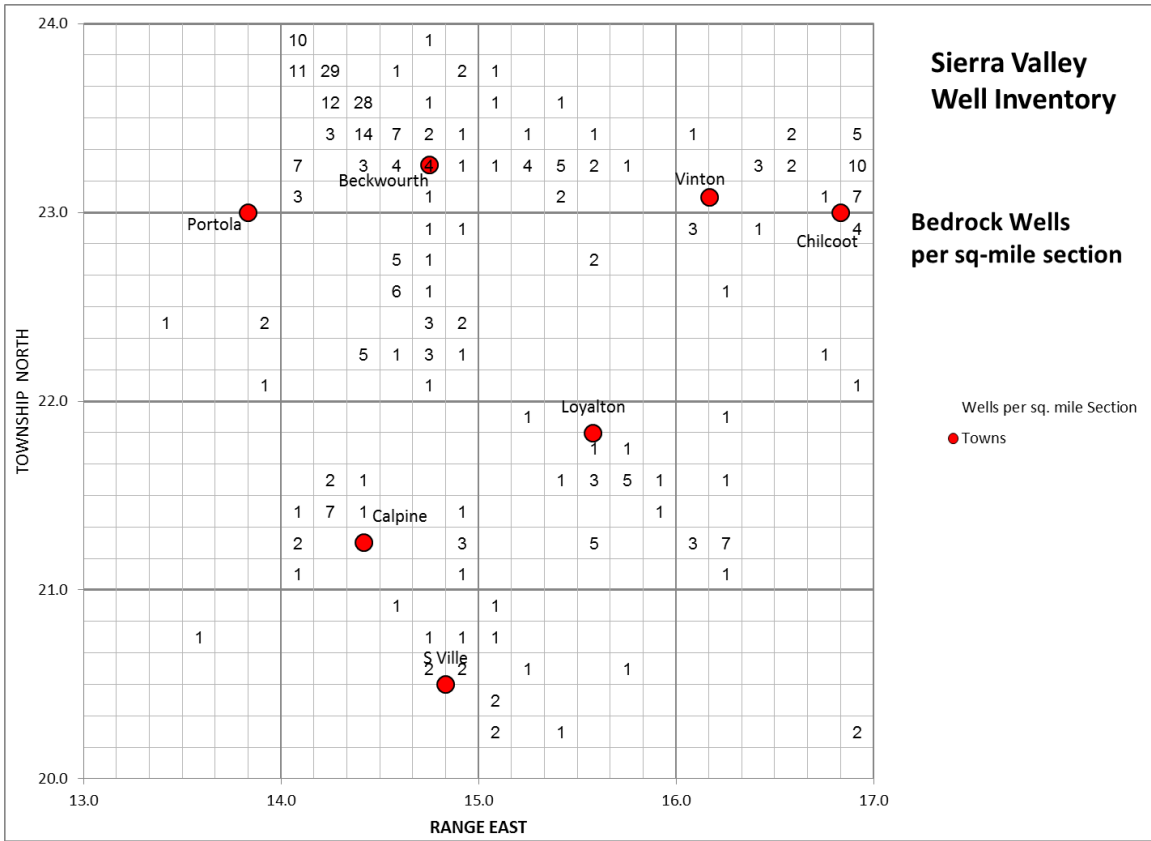
Table of well casing diameters in Sierra Valley.		
casing diameter, inches	number of wells drilled	
1	1	0.2%
2	29	5.7%
3	2	0.4%
4	43	8.4%
5	21	4.1%
6	312	60.9%
7	42	8.2%
8	30	5.9%
9	1	0.2%
10	4	0.8%
11	2	0.4%
12	4	0.8%
14	1	0.2%
16	17	3.3%
20	1	0.2%
29	1	0.2%
30	1	0.2%
Total # of wells	512	100.0%

Table 2-2 Well casing diameters.

Chart 2-5 illustrates the history of groundwater development in SV. Of the 845 wells for which drilling dates were given, beginning in 1907, only five percent were drilled before 1970. About 92% have been drilled since 1971, with more than one-third (35%) drilled in the ten-year period 2001-2010.



Map 2-1 Distribution of wells across Sierra Valley. The numbers indicate the number of wells per square mile section.



Map 2-2 Distribution of bedrock wells across Sierra Valley. The numbers indicate the number of wells per square mile section.

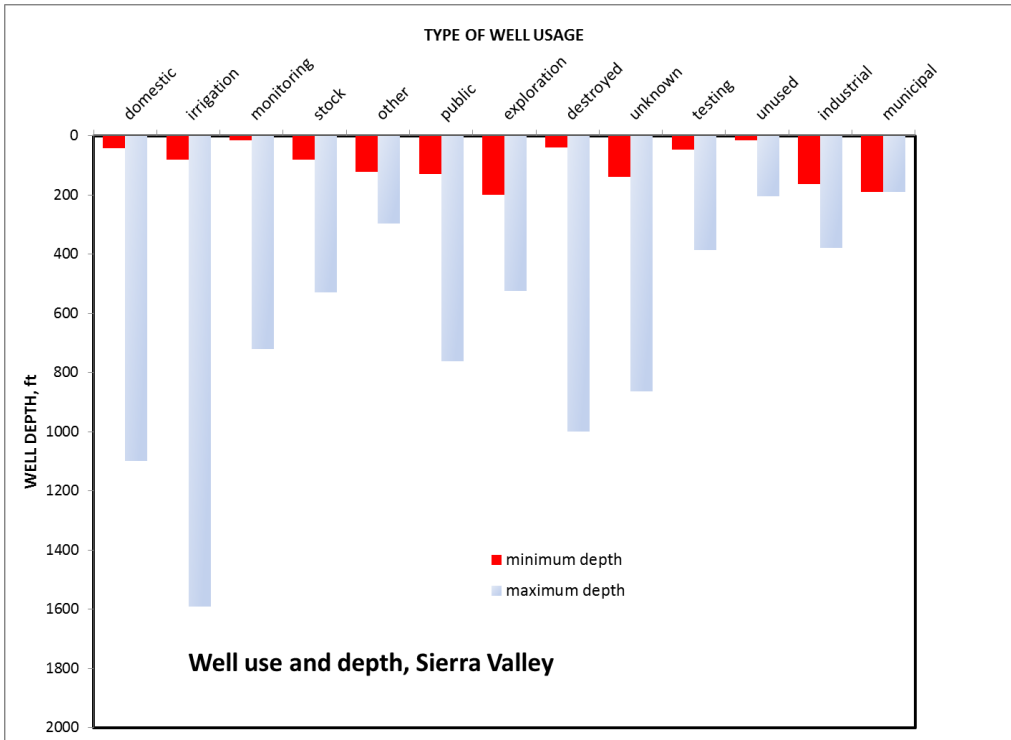


Chart 2-1 Well use application and well depth in Sierra Valley.

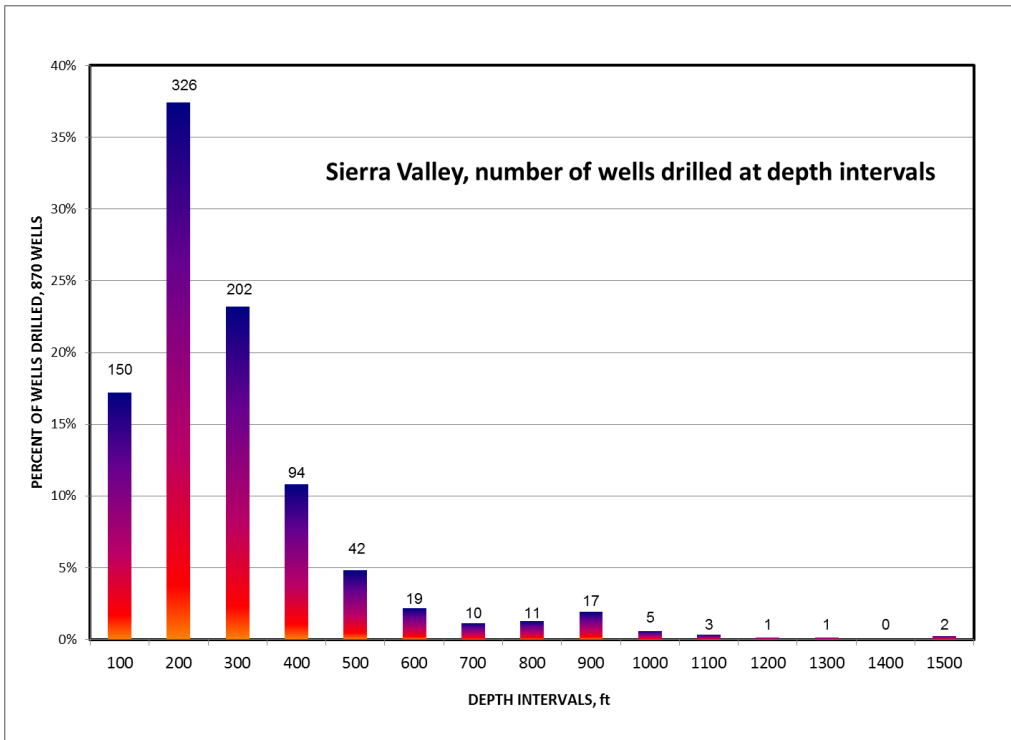


Chart 2-2 Number of wells drilled per depth interval. The vertical bars are percentages of all wells drilled in Sierra Valley. The numbers on top of each bar are actual number of wells drilled to that depth interval.

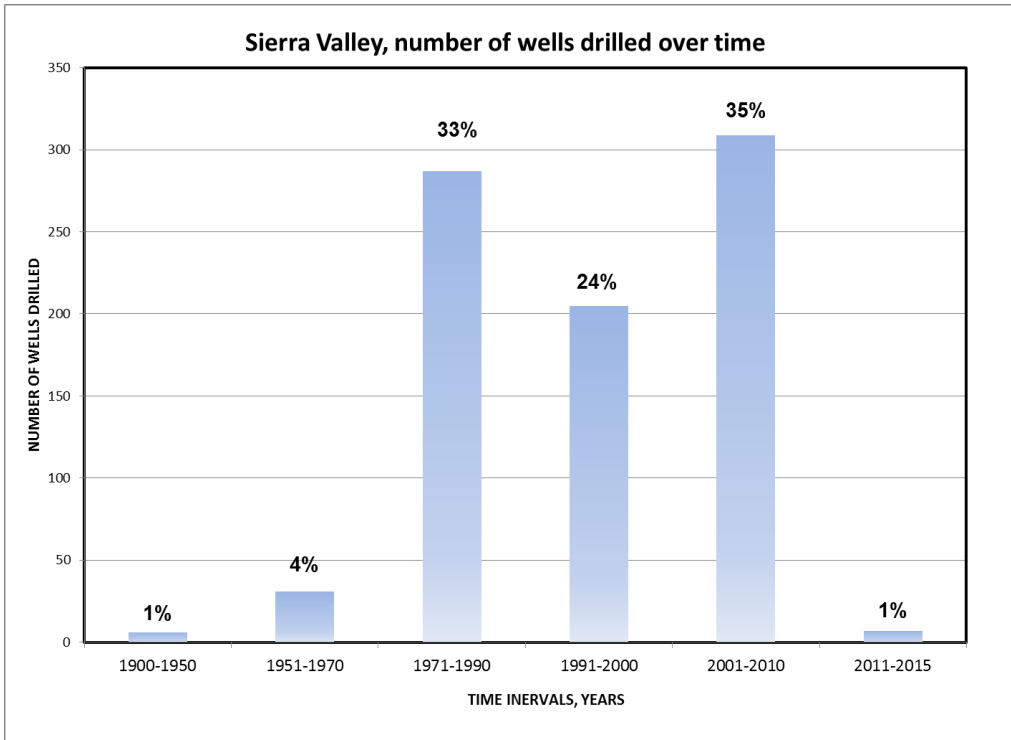


Chart 2-3 Historical trends of groundwater development in Sierra Valley.

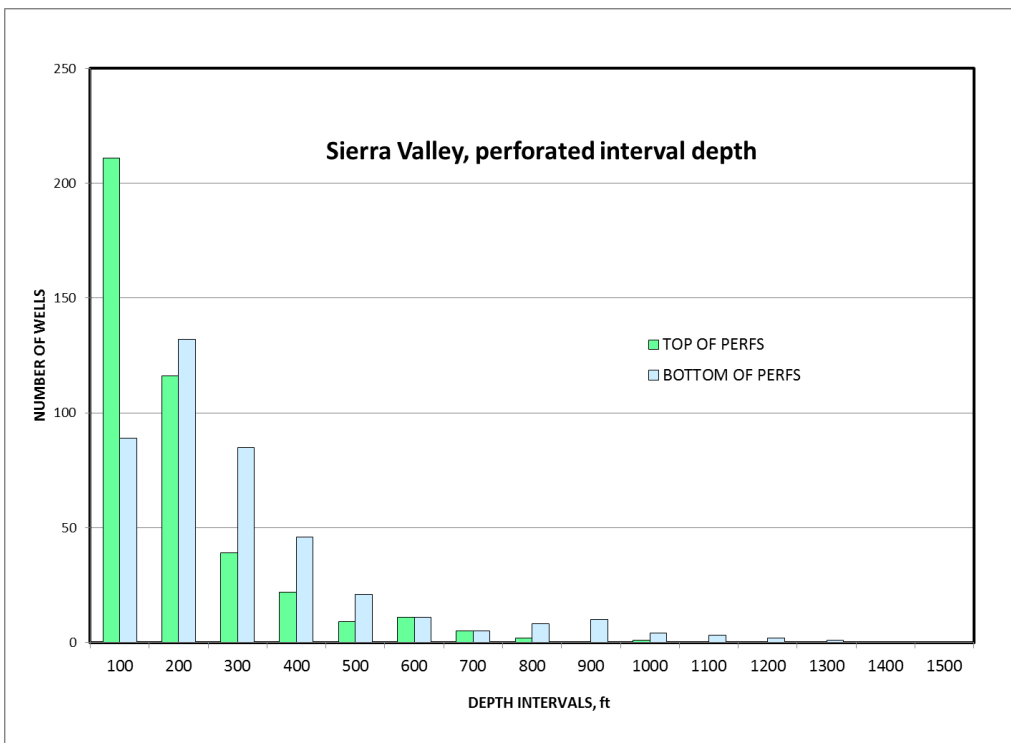


Chart 2-4 Perforated interval depths in Sierra Valley wells. The vertical bars indicate how many wells have their top and bottom of perforations in their respective interval. For example more than 200 wells' tops of perforations are above 100 ft, and about 90 wells have their perforations above 100 ft depth.

3. Inventory of Groundwater Quality in Sierra Valley

Background

By groundwater quality is meant the chemical make-up of the water produced from wells, springs, and streams. This includes major ion chemistry (like chloride, sulfate, etc.), trace elements (e.g. arsenic or chromium), and field data like temperature, electric conductivity (EC), pH, etc. water quality data also include biological data (e.g. coliform bacteria, etc.).

Collecting groundwater quality data has at least three objectives:

1. Assessing the current water quality state and identify parts of the aquifer system that poses a threat to the intended well use (for example retarding crop growth).
2. Detect and identify water quality trends that may hint at future water quality problems, as a result of pumping and groundwater development.
3. Groundwater chemistry data, preferably together with light stable isotopes, serve as a tool to help characterize the aquifer-system, including recharge and discharge zones.

Item 3 is covered in separate companion report.

An assessment of basin-wide groundwater quality was conducted, using the DWR's historic groundwater chemistry data base, spanning the time period from 1981 until 2002. The objectives of the field data collection program were to:

- augment the existing data base to fill data gaps, and
- To continue the time series until the present.

This report concerns itself only with certain specific water quality parameters to identify potential natural and human source areas of groundwater contamination. In a concurrent report the groundwater chemistry and isotope data were analyzed to help characterize groundwater flow in the basin, and how it connects to the uplands groundwater recharge areas.

The DWR monitoring wells are all equipped with pumps, ready to be sampled. A more involved task was to sample the five nested piezometer sets installed by the SVGMD, which required purging and sampling with a special pump. The two-inch diameter piezometers are of particular interest since their screen intervals are in very well defined discrete depth intervals. This provided an opportunity to conduct a more comprehensive

data collection, including not only the major ion chemistry, but also measuring dissolved oxygen, redox conditions and nitrogen species, parameters necessary to characterize the geochemical conditions at depth. Furthermore a select number of piezometers were sampled for tritium analysis.

Groundwater chemistry data base

Sierra Valley groundwater chemistry data have been collected by DWR since the late 1950's. However, most of the early datasets are incomplete and contain only a limited selection of water quality parameters.

The first comprehensive groundwater chemistry data was collected in 1981, including major ion chemistry and selected trace element data from 40 wells (see schematic map). Over the following 14 years DWR continued collecting data and by 1995 a total of 177 samples had been collected from 67 wells. This database was expanded with another 27 wells sampled in 2002 by a contractor working for the SVGMD (data in KDS, 2003). Thereby a substantial groundwater chemistry data record has been established. To date the historical data record includes:

1. A total of 67 Sierra Valley major ion and trace element groundwater chemistry data sets obtained from DWR files. Although the epm-balances range between -24% and 27%, the average ion equivalent balance is 0%. In a few data sets missing major ion values had to be calculated by assuming an equivalent balance of zero.
2. A total of 27 data sets collected in 2002, with equivalent balances between 0 and 10%.
3. Fourteen chemistry data sets from the District's five nested monitoring wells (at five locations, MW-2 through MW-6) sampled at shallow, intermediate, and deep levels. Piezometer chemistry data were obtained from KDS (2003; 2005). These piezometers were resampled in the summer of 2015, including light stable isotopes. The ion balances are between -6% and 7%.
4. A groundwater chemistry data base of 45 samples collected in 2014 from selected valley floor wells, specifically for the purposes of this project. The equivalent balances are between -8% and 18%. This database was expanded by:
 - a. Twelve groundwater chemistry datasets obtained from consulting reports.
 - b. Sierra Valley geothermal water chemistry data collected from 13 wells with temperatures between 26 and 73 degrees C. the data were obtained from a State data base and include Campbell HS and the former Marble Hot Wells. Ion balances are between -5% and +6%.

5. An isotope database collected from uplands springs and streams for the purpose of this project.

Limitations on analysis of time trends

Although the purpose of the DWR and SVGMD groundwater chemistry database has to our knowledge never been stated, presumably the objective is to monitor water quality trends over time, in order to detect any water quality changes in response to groundwater pumping. At least this would be a prudent thing to do since groundwater flow gradients have the potential of enhancing flow of poor quality water into the pumping zones, leading to groundwater quality degradation.

The dilemma is, however, that after the initial batch of 40 wells was sampled in 1981, only 26 wells have been resampled, and of these only 11 were resampled during the latest monitoring event in 2002. Furthermore most of the 2002 data sets are incomplete datasets, missing most often the parameters of greatest interest, like boron and nitrate.

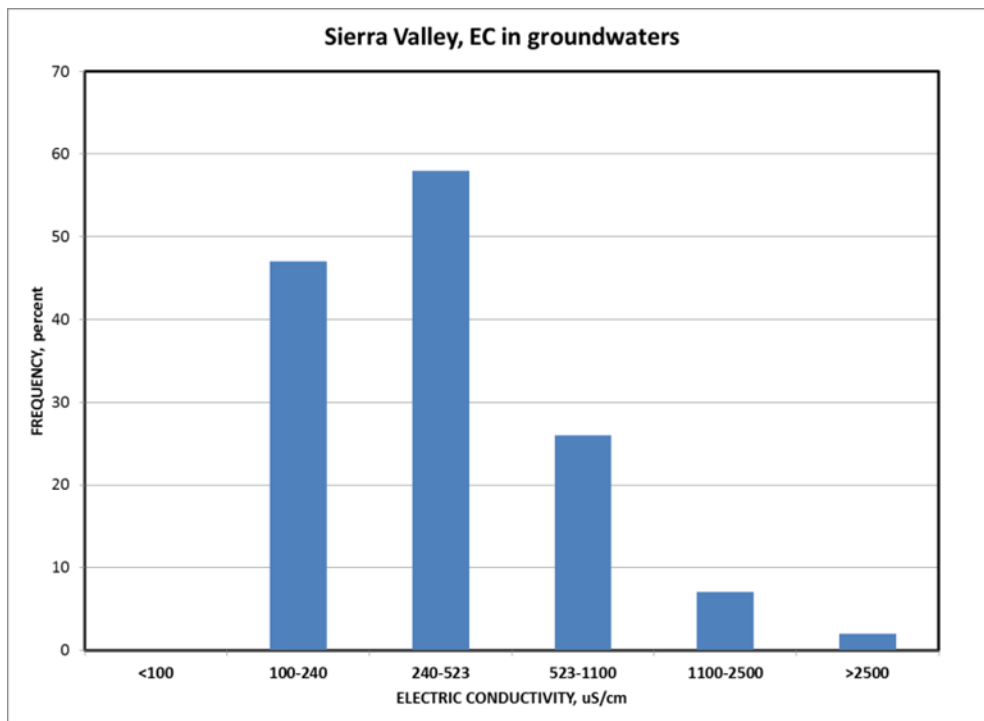


Chart 3-1 Electric conductivity (EC) in Sierra Valley groundwaters. The vertical axis is “number of wells. Note that most groundwaters measured have conductivities less than 500 uS/cm.

This permits virtually no comparison between samples collected over time. The same problem occurs in the wells sampled apparently randomly between 1981 and 2002. This defeats the purpose of the groundwater quality monitoring program.

The inconsistency between sampling events is demonstrated in the schematic map and the table of sampling events.

One objective of the 2014/15 sampling effort was to duplicate the 1981 sampling run by re-sampling all 40 wells sampled in 1981. Unfortunately this has not been possible since no access was given to DWR's field notes to determine the exact well locations (including well owner names, and drilling reports). When it became clear that this well information from DWR was not available it was decided instead, with help from SVGMD's field personnel to sample a selection of irrigation and residential wells in the SVGMD's monitoring well network (the so-called "DMS wells").

However, the unavailability of well log information for most of the DWR database for now precludes three-dimensional mapping of water quality parameters.

Major ion chemistry

Total dissolved solids levels in Sierra Valley groundwaters range between about 100 and 1500 mg/l (or 160 to 2500 uS/cm). Including only the DWR groundwater quality data set from 67 wells, the equivalent percentages for the major cations and anions were calculated and plotted in Chart 3-1. The Sierra Valley groundwaters cover a wide range of water types ranging from comparatively low percentages of chloride, sulfate, sodium, and potassium plotting in the lower left corner to high percentages of the same constituents in the upper right corner.

The low TDS waters plot as low sodium waters in the lower left corner evolving to sodium-sulfate waters in the upper right hand corner with more than 1000 mg/L TDS. Sierra Valley groundwater chemistry covers a wide range, a pattern that is symptomatic of groundwater chemistry evolution in silicate rocks and sediments under somewhat elevated groundwater temperatures (up to 40 degrees C). Similar patterns have been observed elsewhere in northeast California (e.g. in the Modoc Plateau and the adjacent Great Basin).

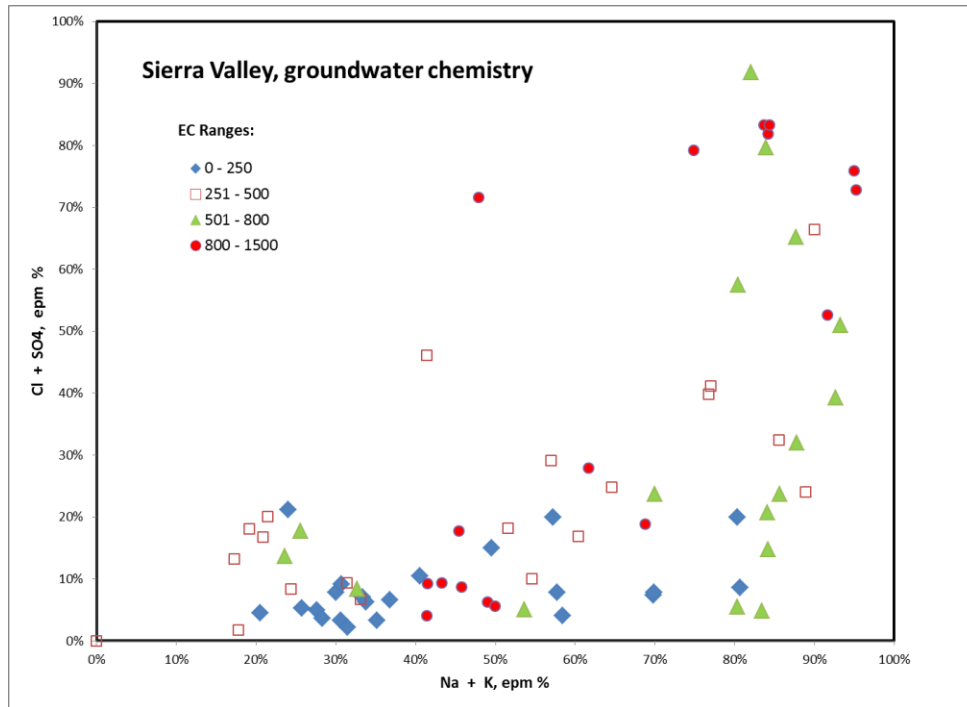


Chart 3-2 Equivalent percentages in Sierra Valley groundwaters. Note how the low chloride-sulfate waters are associated with low EC levels (< 250 uS/cm).

Chloride and sulfate range from 1 mg/L to 545 mg/L and from 1 to 370 mg/L, respectively. Basin wide the TDS ranges from 115 to more than 1400 mg/L.

Geothermal waters

As is typical in these basins in NE California most groundwaters have somewhat elevated temperatures due to the high heat flow that is characteristic for these basins. However, there are locations in faulted bedrock areas buried by the younger sediments where groundwater does penetrate to greater depth, to re-emerge at places like Marble Hot Wells and on the Filipini Ranch.

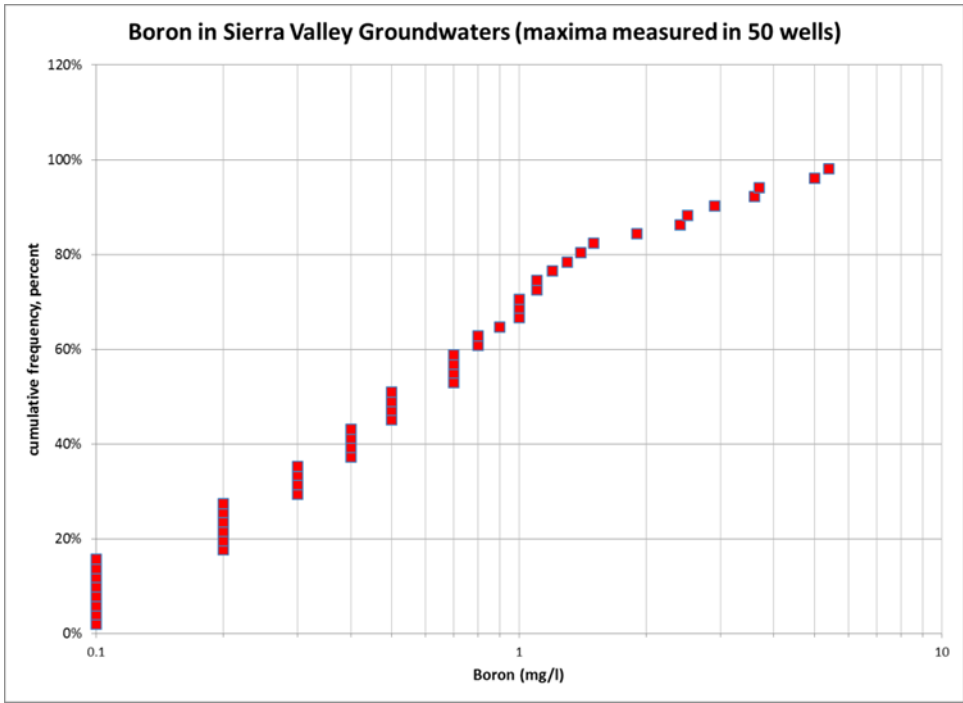


Chart 3-3 Cumulative frequency of boron in Sierra Valley groundwaters. About 20% of waters sampled have boron levels greater than 1.5 mg/L.

Water quality parameters of concern

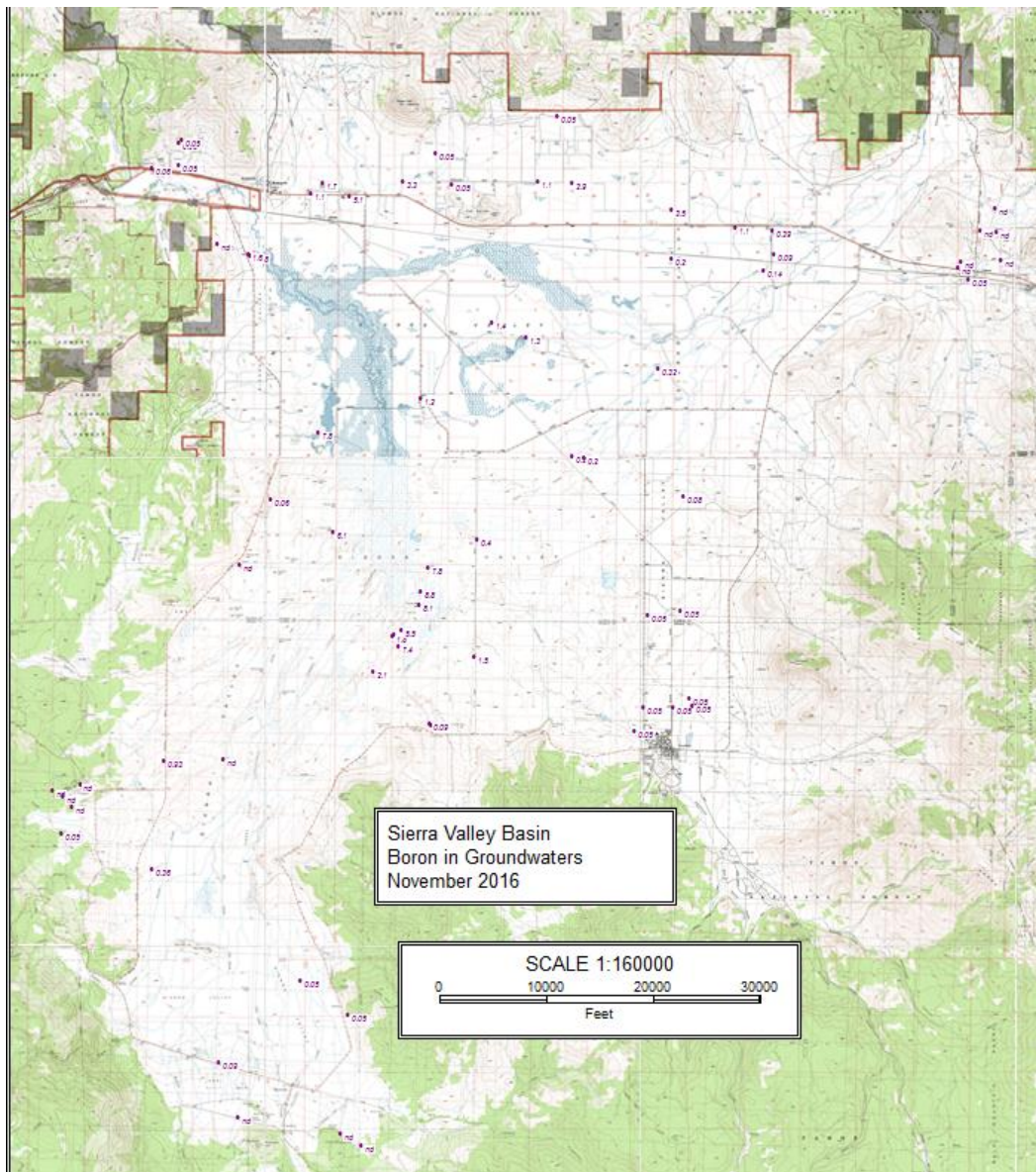
Boron

Elevated boron levels are commonly associated with geothermal waters and can become a limiting factor in growing certain crops. It is highly soluble in natural waters, a weathering bi-product in granitic rocks, and more so in pegmatites (Hem, 1985, p. 129). In Sierra Valley high boron levels correlate with groundwater temperature and TDS. However, the correlations are rather coarse, suggesting other unknown associations might be involved.

Table 2. Classification of Irrigated Water Based on Boron Concentration In Relation to Plant Tolerance

<i>Classification</i>	<i>Sensitive Plants</i>	<i>Semi-Tolerant Plants</i>	<i>Tolerant Plants</i>
	ppm Boron		
Excellent	< 0.3	< 0.6	< 1.0
Good	0.4-0.6	0.7-1.3	1.0-2.0
Fair	0.7-1.0	1.4-2.0	2.1-3.0
Poor	1.1-1.3	2.1-2.5	3.1-3.8
Unsuitable	> 1.3	> 2.5	> 3.8

The attached map shows boron levels in selected wells in SV. Although we are not able to draw a time series plot for boron, a cumulative frequency diagram in the attached chart shows that boron in many wells can be significant. For example 30% of all wells



Map 3-1 mg/L Boron in Sierra Valley groundwaters

sampled have boron levels greater than 1.0, and maximum boron levels can be greater than 5 mg/L (8.1 mg/L in the Filipini geothermal well).

Boron time trends in groundwater

The data are not very well suited to plot time series of boron in groundwater. Nevertheless changes can be noted by visual inspection of the database. This is of great importance since the SVBN aquifer system has been significantly stressed in the past 30

years, and will continue to be pumped in the future. Changing boron levels may become one important indicator of pending changes due to aquifer development.

The enclosed table below summarizes the changes observed between successive sampling events. Among 122 samples taken, boron changes were observed in 80% of samples taken, of which 34% were increases, 46% were decreases and 20% showed no change. In other words boron changes were observed in 4/5th of the samples taken. It remains to be seen how significant these results are. But the occurrence of more decreasing than increasing boron levels should not necessarily be interpreted as an indication that conditions are improving conditions, but rather that changes are underway.

Table of Boron increases and decreases observed in Sierra Valley monitoring wells, 1981 through 2002.		
number of sampling events	207	
B samples taken	122	100%
B increases	41	34%
B decreases	56	46%
no changes	25	20%
# of wells where B increases were observed	26	
# of wells where B decreases were observed	38	
maximum B increase between sampling events	5.4 mg/L	
maximum B decrease between sampling events	-5.4 mg/L	

Table 3-1 Boron changes in Sierra Valley groundwaters, observed between 1981 and 2002.

Recommendation: Given the limitations of the database, a similar trend analysis may have to be also conducted on other water quality parameters, for example nitrate.

Nitrate

Nitrate is a form of nitrogen that is a rather ubiquitous water quality parameter in the environment. Nitrate is very soluble, and is the oxidized ionic species of NO₂. In groundwaters with reducing chemical conditions (low to no oxygen) nitrogen can occur in the form NO₂ (nitrite), and more rarely as NH₃ (ammonia). Unless specially sampled for using the appropriate preservatives, the nitrite and ammonia species oxidize as soon as they get in contact with the atmosphere. If the groundwater conditions were reducing the reduced nitrogen species are oxidized into NO₃ since most monitoring programs do not bother about measuring redox potential or use special preservatives for NO₂ and NH₃.

For a more in-depth presentation of nitrogen chemistry, the interested reader is referred to Hem (1985, p. 124).

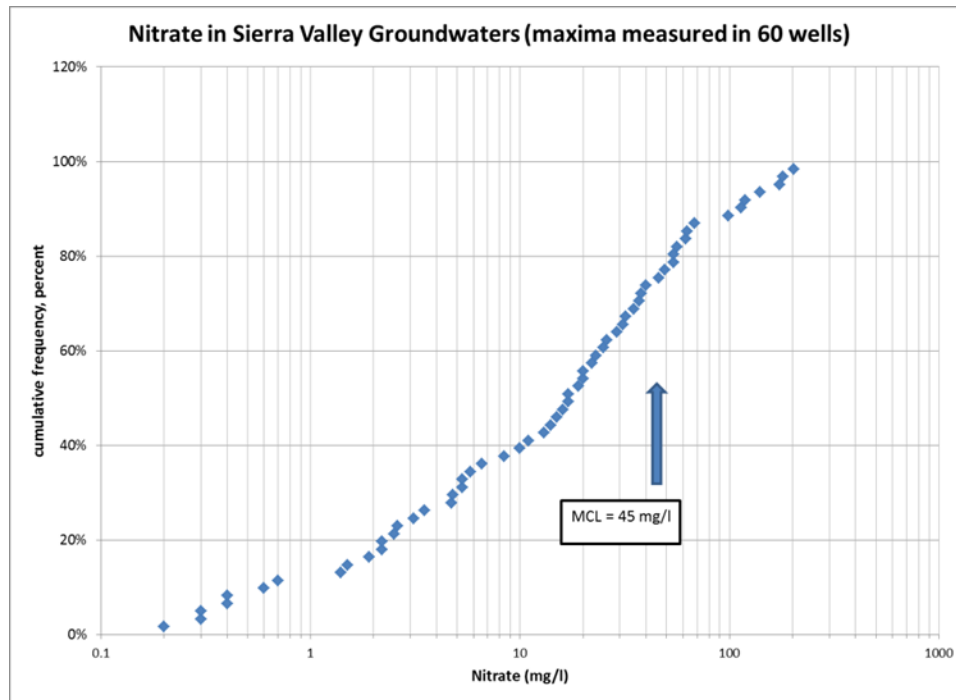
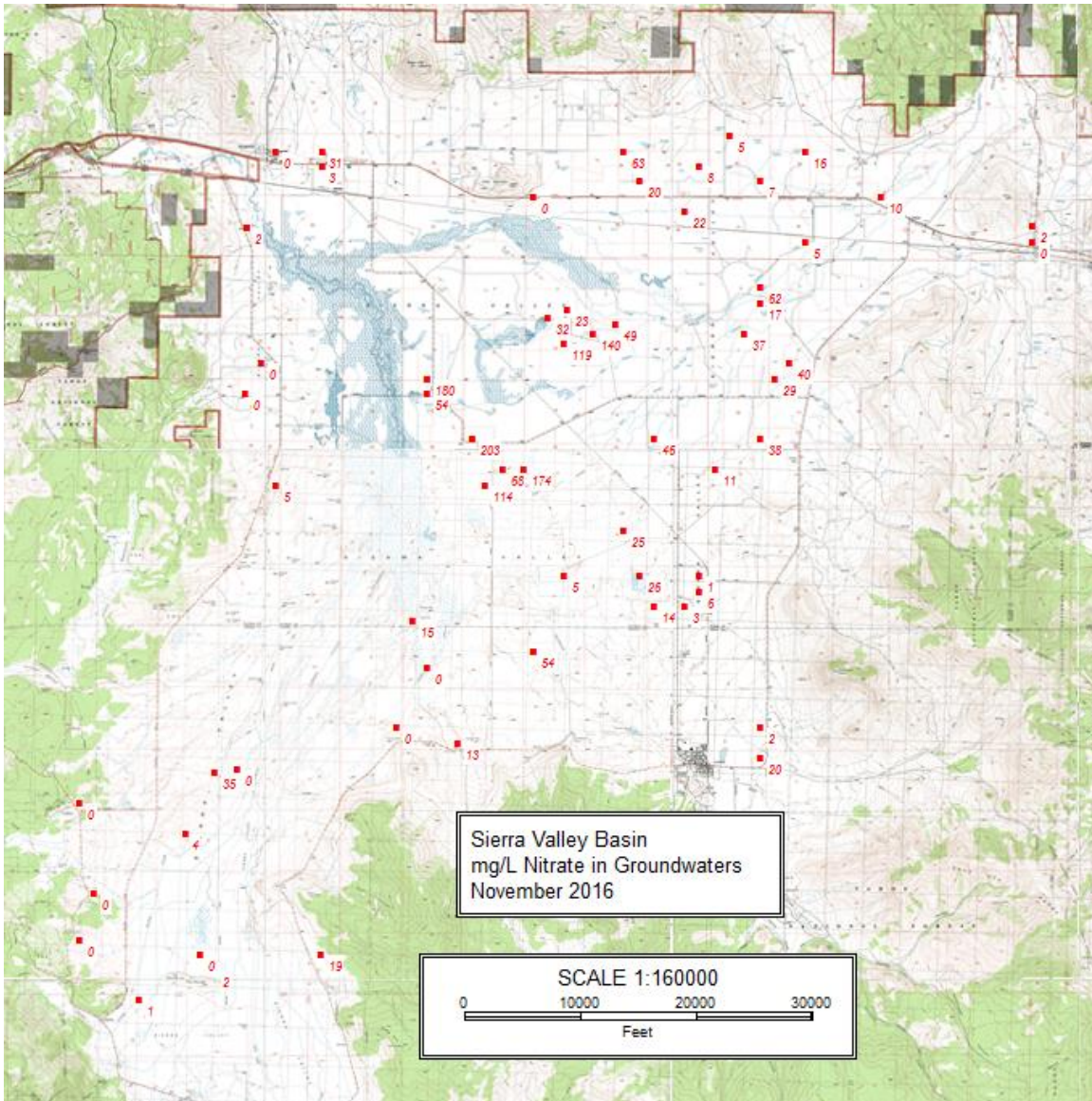


Chart 3-4 cumulative frequencies of nitrate measured in Sierra Valley groundwaters between 1981 and 2002.

Therefore NO₃ values in this database are probably total nitrogen measured as NO₃. High nitrate values are always suspect, possibly indicating groundwater pollution either by agricultural fertilizers or underground septic leachfields (on-site residential wastewater disposal).

Included in this report is a map of nitrate values as sampled in 2014/15. The federal drinking water standard permits a maximum level of 44 mg/L nitrogen as nitrate (10 mg/L as N, nitrogen). However, any nitrate levels above background are usually viewed as suspect, possibly indicating contamination.

In the attached nitrate frequency diagram about 25% of all wells measured exceed the drinking water standard of 44 mg/L. more so, if one assumes that the natural background of nitrate in Sierra Valley groundwater is 0.1 mg/L (as is commonly done), then practically all wells measured would be “polluted”. Somehow this does not make sense since many areas in Sierra Valley are not cultivated or used for pasture. To clarify this, one could attempt to identify the natural background level of nitrate. After all, the Sierra Valley Basin is filled with lacustrine deposits of clay, silt, and sand. Such deposits



Map 3-2 Nitrate in Sierra Valley groundwaters.

usually contain abundant organic deposits (peat), formed by decay of organic (plant) remains.

This could be done by means of cumulative frequency diagrams plotted on probability graph paper, to sort out sub-populations of nitrate data. A more alternate approach would be to employ nitrogen isotope techniques.

Sodium Adsorption Ratio (SAR)

The tendency of irrigation water to replace calcium and magnesium adsorbed in the soil with sodium can be expressed by the sodium-adsorption ratio (SAR) (Hem 1985, p. 216,

161). High SAR values indicate a potential of sodium replacing calcium and magnesium adsorbed to certain clay minerals in the soil, thereby eventually damaging the structure of the soil.

The SAR is calculated as

$$\text{SAR} = \frac{[\text{Na}^+]}{\sqrt{0.5 \cdot [\text{Ca}^{2+}] + [\text{Mg}^{2+}]}}$$

Where the ion concentrations are in mille-equivalents per liter (Hem 1985, p. 161).

A cumulative frequency diagram was prepared for the SAR values calculated for the 1981-2002 Sierra Valley monitoring events (97 data points).

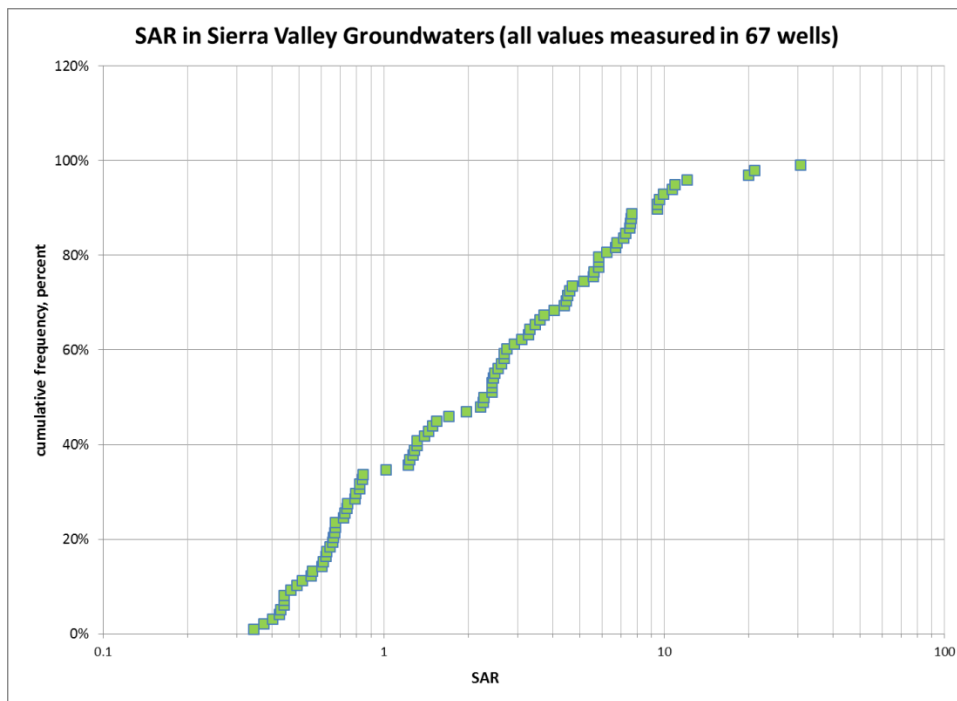


Chart 3-5 Cumulative frequencies of SAR measured in Sierra Valley groundwaters between 1981 and 2002.

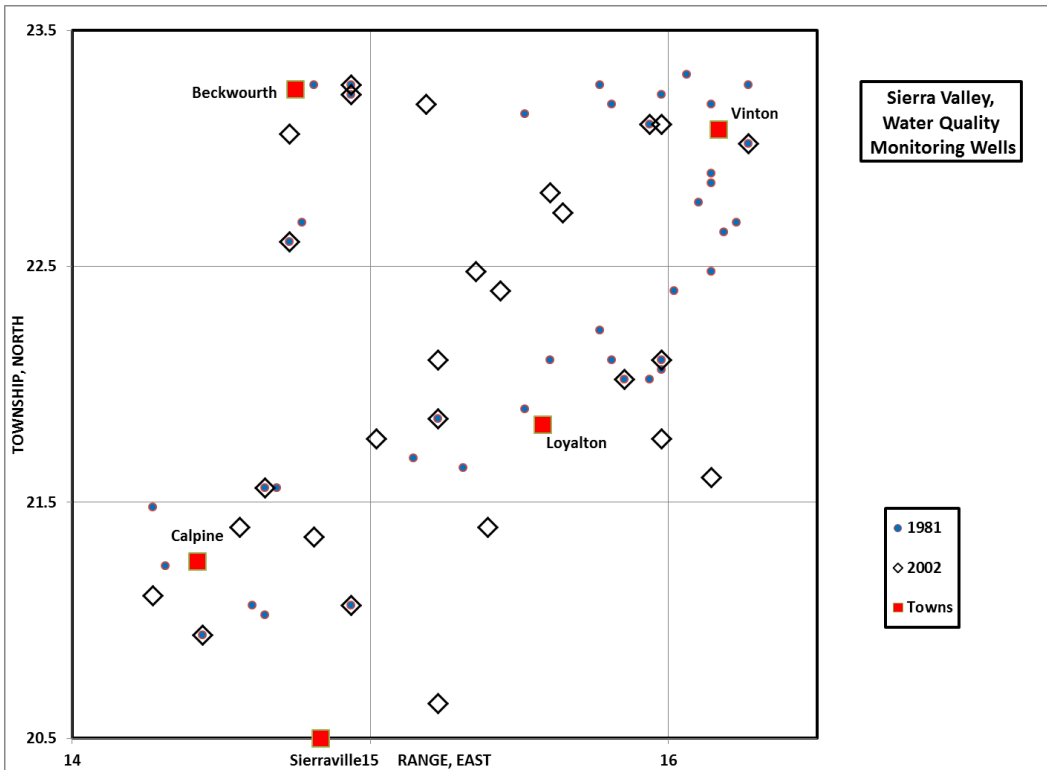
Summary and conclusions

Sierra Valley groundwater chemistry is highly variable. The variability, however, appears to be more aerially than vertical. Nevertheless vertical variability is evident in the southern monitoring wells and is expected to become more evident once we have been provided with the well log numbers for each of the wells that are part of DWR's groundwater quality monitoring network.

In a companion report it will be demonstrated with the chemistry and isotope data that applying the terms "shallow" and "deep" aquifer is justified. However, a few words are in order about how depth intervals and regional extent of these aquifers are determined.

The screened intervals indicated in the driller’s logs provide information true to the definition of the term ‘aquifer’: a permeable, water-bearing geologic formation that provides water to a pumping well under economically sustainable conditions (Freeze and Cherry, 1979). Undoubtedly the objective of well construction is always to maximize well yield, thereby fitting the abovementioned aquifer definition.

A complicating factor is that the formations between the shallow and deep aquifers also contain water, though the formations probably have significantly smaller bulk permeabilities – at least low enough to not make them attractive for well construction. Nevertheless, the chemical data suggest a continuum of values, which can be interpreted as a “leaky confined aquifer” setting.



Map 3-3 Water quality monitoring well locations in Sierra Valley, 1981 and 2002.

4. Bibliography

Hem JD, 1985. Study and interpretation of the chemical characteristics of natural water. US Geol. Survey Water Supply Paper 2254. 263 pages.

Freeze A and J Cherry, 1979. Groundwater. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 604 pages.

Piper, 1944. A graphic procedure in the geochemical interpretation of water analyses. Amer. Geophys. Union Trans., v. 25, 914-923.

Sinclair AJ, 1973, Selection of threshold values in geochemical data using probability plots, J. Geochem. Explor. V. 3, pp.129-149.