

1.9 Aquifer Recharge Areas

Aquifers can receive recharge from several different sources. These include infiltration of precipitation and snowmelt, water diverted from surface water bodies such as streams and lakes, and leakage through confining layers from overlying or underlying aquifers.

Recharge from Infiltration and from Leakage

Most aquifers receive some recharge directly from the infiltration of precipitation. In this case, the precipitation enters the ground and percolates downward through unsaturated material at the surface to the water table. Unconfined aquifers are recharged over their entire lateral extent.

Many confined aquifers consist of dipping strata that are unconfined in their outcrop area (that is, the area where the geological formation intersects the ground surface). The outcrop area of a formation is the area conventionally shown on a geological map (Refer to Plates 1.4.1 and 1.5.1). Typically, the outcrop areas of water-bearing strata are considered their recharge areas. Aquifers that do not crop out at the surface must receive their recharge via leakage through confining layers.

If the aquifer is laterally extensive and generally confined with a small outcrop area, the majority of the water that the aquifer yields to a well may originate as leakage through a confining unit rather than from direct infiltration of precipitation. Hydraulic analyses, including computer simulations, have demonstrated that when pumping from wells alters ground-water flow and hydraulic gradients, the relative proportions of recharge from various sources changes.

Precipitation, Evapotranspiration, and Runoff

Not all the precipitation reaches the water table. Some evaporates or is taken up by plants and transpired. These two processes are often lumped together and called evapotranspiration. In addition, the soils may have a layer that is very poorly permeable due to cementation or high clay content. The infiltrating water will percolate down to this layer, which could be a foot or more below the surface and begin to flow laterally, ultimately discharging to a surface water body or being taken up by plants without actually reaching the water table. Various modifications to the land surface due to human activities also affect the amount of recharge that an aquifer receives. This is especially evident where improvements like buildings and paved surfaces intercept precipitation and divert it to storm-water collection systems.

Estimation of Groundwater Recharge

The New Jersey Geological Survey conducted an investigation into the affects of local climate, soil series, and land use/land cover on the average annual recharge rate for any parcel in the state of New Jersey with an area of 5 acres or greater (Charles *et al.* 1993).

Between 1996 and 2000, the method was used by the NJGS to prepare recharge maps of Middlesex County; Cape May County; selected areas in Monmouth County; the Rancocas, Pennsauken, and Cooper River watersheds in southern New Jersey; and the majority of the Upper Passaic, Rockaway, and Whippany River watersheds (that is, WMA 6) in northern New Jersey.

More recently, the method has been used by the NJGS to prepare recharge maps of each county in New Jersey except Hudson and Essex, for which current soil surveys are lacking. As of September 2002, the NJGS has also created recharge maps for the 20 watershed management areas of the state, except those portions of Watershed Management Areas 4, 5, 6, and 7 that are in Essex or Hudson Counties. All of these county and watershed management areas groundwater recharge maps can be downloaded from the NJGS website:

<http://www.state.nj.us/dep/njgs/geodata/dgs02-3/dgs02-3.htm>

Aquifer Recharge in WMA 4

The general recharge characteristics of portions of WMA 4 are related to the geology of each area. In most locations in WMA 4, the bedrock is covered by glacial drift. Where bedrock is exposed, it typically represents a recharge area. Where the surficial glacial deposits are coarse, have rapid permeability, and exhibit little or moderate runoff, infiltrating precipitation will pass through the root zone more quickly and more of it will reach the water table. Other areas are covered with till or fine-grained lake-bottom deposits, which have lower permeability and tend to slow the downward movement of infiltrating precipitation and to deflect it laterally. For the most part, soils with rapid permeability are in need of greater protection from sources of pollution. Hydrologic Soil Groups are discussed in Section 1.6. Typically, Group A soils (See Plate 1.6.1) have the highest potential recharge. Hydrologic Soil Groups B, C, and D are progressively less likely to represent valuable recharge areas. However, the value of an individual soil series in recharging an aquifer also related to the relative area that it covers in comparison to the other soils that are present.

With respect to fractured rock aquifers, the low storativity of the fracture network would result in poor yields in many areas if it were not for overlying glacial till. Even though the till typically has rather low permeability, it nevertheless has moderate storage capacity, approximately an order of magnitude greater than the fractured rock. Because the till is unstratified, water that infiltrates into it encounters resistance to flow in the lateral direction as well as in the vertical. Consequently, the path of least resistance is often downward. The vertical thickness of the till is rather small in relation to the lateral extent of the aquifer, making the stored water easily accessible to ameliorate the regional impacts of diversion from the underlying aquifer.