



ENVIRONMENT

Hyundai wells will have minimal impact on water, Georgia officials tell Bulloch residents

John Deem Savannah Morning News

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Planned wells to serve Hyundai Motor Company's electric vehicle manufacturing operation near Savannah will not risk an underground water source that Bulloch County homes and farms have relied on for decades, state environmental officials told a largely skeptical audience in the auditorium of a rural high school Tuesday.

Up to 6.6 million gallons per day drawn from the Floridan Aquifer through four Bulloch wells would be sent to Bryan County to supply the Hyundai site and related development it is projected to attract to the area under permits proposed by the Georgia Environmental Protection Division.

EPD officials traveled to Southeast Bulloch High School to explain the expected impact of the extractions and answer questions from residents concerned about the future availability and quality of water their own wells draw from the aquifer, an extensive underground reservoir covering 100,000 square miles beneath all of Florida and parts of Georgia, Alabama and South Carolina.

The representatives repeated their projections, based on U.S. Geological Survey data, that aquifer depths would fall by up to 19 feet near the wells and by less than 10 feet outside a 5-mile radius of the withdrawal area if the wells are operating at permitted capacity.

Typically, well pumps are set 30- to 60-feet deep within the aquifer itself, below a thick, solid, "confining area," explained Assistant State Geologist Christine Voudy.

"When we did our simulation, the maximum drawdown at capacity at those locations was 19 feet, Voudy explained. "So, it's less than the 30-foot (threshold)."

That would keep those pumps submerged and able to draw water.

Pete Peterson, a Guyton-based well driller who has been in the business for 43 years, said he'd consulted with the owners of other wells services – a few of whom sat in the front row Tuesday – and was encouraged by the state's projections.

“If the (EPD) model is correct, we expect a minimal impact on a properly installed deep well,” he told the audience. “Folks, your deep wells are not going to go dry.”

Deep wells are those tapping into the Floridan while shallow wells access a “surficial” aquifer.

Shallow wells are not affected by aquifer withdrawals, Peterson noted.

“That water will always be available,” he added.

Calling for vote: Petition aims to stop wells for Hyundai's GA site

Well mitigation

A fund to help property owners whose private wells are impacted by the increased pumping from the Floridan grew to \$1 million just hours before Tuesday's meeting.

Hyundai, lured to the state in part by more than \$2 billion in incentives, is donating \$250,000 to the pool, according to the Savannah Harbor-Interstate 16 Corridor Joint Development Authority, which also is pitching in with an equal amount. Development authorities in Bryan and Bulloch counties also are contributing a quarter-million dollars each.

Establishment of the fund is one of the conditions EPD included in the draft permits.

Peterson estimated that lowering a well pump 40 feet would cost an individual property owner from \$900 to \$1,200.

“With some of these older wells – 50, 60, 70 years old – you may end up having to put in a new one,” he added. “You're looking at \$12,000, \$15,000 in this area for that.”

No saltwater intrusion

Water quality in the aquifer will not be impacted by the new wells, EPD officials insisted.

That includes any risk of saltwater infiltration.

“But if there is saltwater intrusion (in the aquifer) in Bryan County, how do you know it won’t happen in Bulloch County?” asked an audience member.

That’s an often-posed question because the location of the wells in Bulloch County is tied to water withdrawal limits imposed on Bryan County as part of an effort to limit saltwater entering the aquifer near Hilton Head Island.

Even though Bryan is in a so-called red zone where pumping is restricted, the aquifer there is in no danger of being exposed to saltwater, nor is it in Bulloch, EPD’s Voudy said.

EPD is accepting written comments on the proposed well permits through Aug. 20 at EPDComments@dnr.ga.gov.

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