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## EPA head 'distressed' by What's Upstream campaign

Feds to investigate advocacy campaign

By DON JENKINS  
Capital Press

The Environmental Protection Agency has suspended funding What's Upstream, as the Office of the Inspector General probes whether the advocacy campaign broke any laws.



Gina McCarthy

EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy told the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee on Tuesday that her agency was "distressed" by the campaign.

"We have put a halt to any reimbursements of funds," she said. "We have told our contractor (the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission) we need to have a full discussion and review before additional monies are spent."

The EPA has financed What's Upstream since 2011 with grants to the fisheries commission, a consortium of 20 Washington tribes. The media campaign was developed by the Swinomish Indian tribe, Seattle public relations firm Strategies 360 and several environmental groups.

The ongoing campaign seeks to rally public support for stricter regulations on Washington state agriculture. The campaign's tactics and claims have angered farm groups and some federal lawmakers.

At a hearing on EPA's budget, Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., said the campaign's website and billboards have "villainized farmers and ranchers."

Fischer compared What's Upstream to the EPA's stealth promotion of its new Waters of the United States rule. The Government Accountability Office concluded last year the effort was an unauthorized use of federal money.

"The financial assistance that your agency gave to fund this lobbying campaign (What's Upstream) is a blatant violation of federal law," Fischer told McCarthy.

"At what point did your agency become aware of the misuse of the EPA funds for the What's Upstream campaign and what role did EPA have in reviewing that billboard and website?" Fischer asked.

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## USING EVERY DROP OF



## Recharging, recycling among steps taken to ensure water supplies

By TIM HEARDEN, SEAN ELLIS  
and MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI  
Capital Press

As El Nino was producing some powerful storms this winter, officials from a water district serving farms just outside Sacramento got an idea.

They opened the gates of a swelling Cache Creek and let the flood waters flow into the Yolo County Flood Control and Water Conservation District's system of irrigation canals.

The canals' dirt lining is porous enough to allow the water to seep into the aquifers, recharging a groundwater supply that's becoming more and more important to growers.

"Normally in wintertime they keep the side gates closed," said Rachael Long, a University of California Cooperative Extension farm adviser in Yolo County. The project is one of many throughout the West aimed at making the most of every drop of precipitation that falls on farms and cities as it becomes clear that the West's ambitious state and federal water projects no longer meet every need, as they used to.

On a grand scale, the West's massive water projects — from the Snake River's 25 dams to California's iconic Central Valley Project and State Water Project — aim to take water where and when it's wet and use it where and when it's dry. But population growth, drought and environmental regulations have exposed the projects' limitations.

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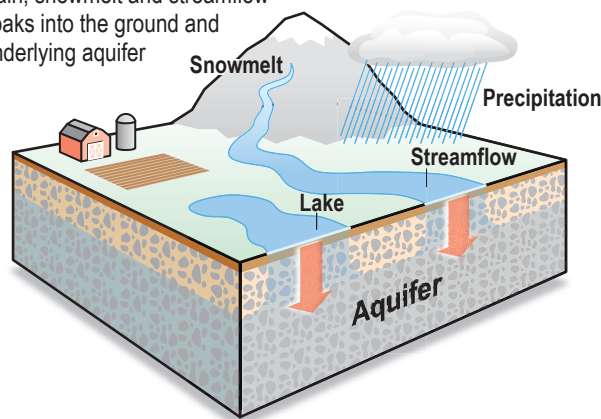
Courtesy City of Pendleton  
Bob Patterson, public works director in Pendleton, Ore., stands next to Aquifer Storage and Recovery Well No. 4. The well head and the 250 horsepower pump motor are next to him.

## Aquifer recharge basics

Recharging an aquifer requires getting more water into the ground than is taken out. The most common forms of recharge occur naturally and artificially:

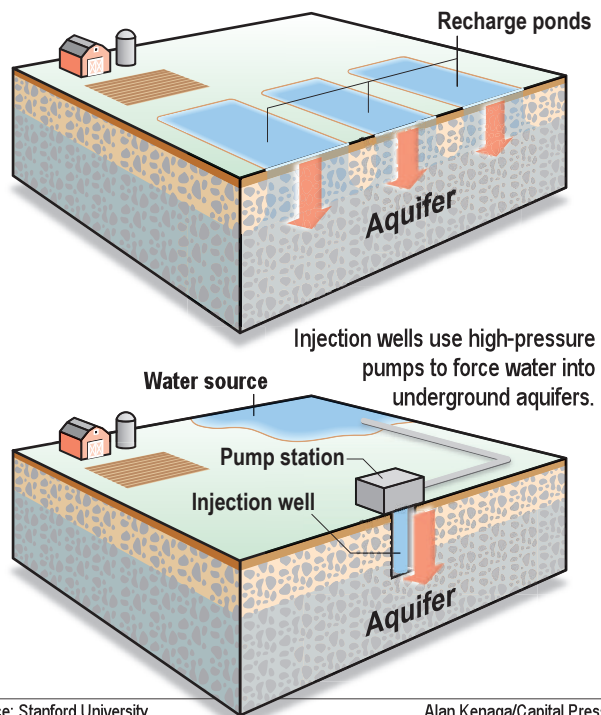
### Natural recharge

Rain, snowmelt and streamflow soaks into the ground and underlying aquifer



### Artificial recharge

Recharge ponds are the most common method of artificial recharge. Large surface basins are flooded with water that slowly infiltrates the soil and underlying aquifer.

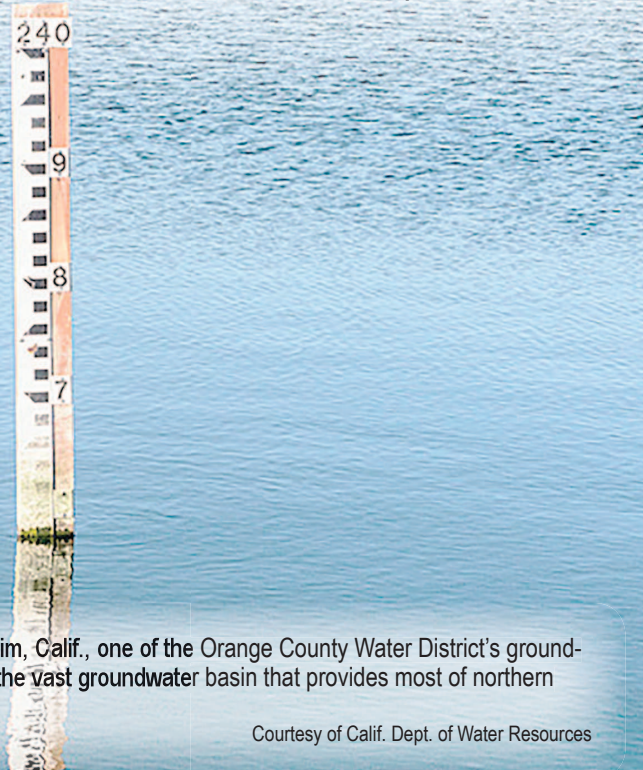


Source: Stanford University

Alan Kenaga/Capital Press

"The key to aquifer storage and recovery is it doesn't work everywhere."

Bob Patterson, the Pendleton, Ore., public works director



A gauge shows the depth of water in the Warner Basin in Anaheim, Calif., one of the Orange County Water District's groundwater recharge basins. The district is responsible for managing the vast groundwater basin that provides most of northern and central Orange County's drinking water.

Courtesy of Calif. Dept. of Water Resources

## USDA faulted for biotech loophole

Current regulations limited to plant pests

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI  
Capital Press

The U.S. Government Accountability Office has faulted the USDA for regulating only those biotech crops containing genes from plant pests.

Current USDA biotech restrictions only apply when genetic material from a plant pest, such as a bacteria or virus, is inserted into the crop.

Plants modified with gene editing and other alternative methods, however, are not subject to USDA oversight during field trials or deregulation procedures that involve environmental analysis.

A recent report from GAO said the approach has resulted in "a gap in USDA's current regulatory coverage" that's persisted even though the agency's had the authority to update its genetic engineering rules for years.

"USDA acknowledges that its regulations overseeing GE crops have not kept pace with these technological developments and do not cover all GE crops," the GAO report said.

While the USDA plans to propose new regulations for biotechnology by September 2016, the GAO said the lack of a timeline with firm milestones will make it hard for managers to track the agency's progress.

The Biotechnology Industry Organization, which represents developers, isn't commenting on the GAO's conclusions until it's done reviewing the recent report, said Karen Batra, its director of communications.

Critics of the government's rules for genetically modified organisms are skeptical that USDA's plans will actually result in stricter oversight.

"They want to get out of the business of regulating these crops," said Bill Freese, science policy analyst for the Center for Food Safety, a nonprofit that's critical of USDA's biotech regulations.

In a response letter to GAO, USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack said he disagreed with the report's characterizations of new technology as "inherently more risky" and the "incorrect impression" that crops were able to "escape USDA regulation" by using alternative methods.

The agency first determines that a crop developed with alternative techniques isn't a plant pest before informing developers that it's not subject to regulation, he said.

It's the characteristics of the crop — such as its potential as a plant pest or noxious weed — that pose a possible risk, and not the technology used to develop the variety, Vilsack said.

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