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## **WATER SUPPLIES MAY BE SHRINKING IN LOUDOUN, ELSEWHERE, SOME SAY GROWTH IS DRAINING DRINKING WELLS**

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By Peter Pae

Armed with a forked tree branch that he holds over the ground, Talbot Warren has helped find water for residents of rural Loudoun County for nearly a quarter-century.

Warren is a dowser -- a man hired to gauge the groundwater supply by watching the movement of a stick. He's proud of his mysterious skills and says he can pinpoint where a well should be dug and how deep it should be.

But in recent years, Warren said, his dowsing twig hasn't swagged the way it used to, and when water is discovered, it hasn't been as plentiful.

"I can tell you that since 1976, it's gone down steadily," said Warren, 50, of Middleburg. "Before, you could go roughly 100 to 150 feet down to get good water. Now, you seem to have to go 450 to 600 feet to get it, and often you don't get enough."

More than half of Loudoun's residents, most of them in rural western Loudoun, still rely on private wells for drinking water. But well drillers, dowsers and residents say water is getting harder to find. They say the hundreds of new homes being built each year in western Loudoun are depleting the area's aquifers.

Loudoun isn't alone. Hydrologists for the U.S. Geological Survey, which monitors several wells in suburban Virginia and Maryland, say that population growth in outlying areas of the Washington region has been the main cause of a general decline in ground water levels.

In fast-growing areas such as Anne Arundel and Charles counties, the water level has dropped by an average of 10 to 20 feet in the last 15 years, said Michael Smigaj, a hydrologic technician with the Geological Survey.

As a result, the groundwater issue has become part of the broader debate over suburban development. In Montgomery County, the town of Poolesville has considered a moratorium on development, amid recurring shortages of well water. In Prince William, opponents of the now-defunct proposal for a Walt Disney Co. historical theme park in Haymarket argued that the project would have exhausted ground water supplies for hundreds of nearby residents.

In Loudoun, the issue has sparked a battle between residents who want limits on development and pro-business advocates, who dismiss reports of shrinking water supply as isolated cases and argue that the cash-strapped county needs the new homes.

"The water table has been dropping. ... We have had wells run dry," said Don Byers, an Aldie resident.

"A public water system is impossible to have in rural Loudoun. The only solution is to restrict growth."

"You have to look at the water problem on an ad hoc basis," countered Frank Sterns, president of the Loudoun chapter of the Northern Virginia Building Industry Association. "I don't think it is symptomatic of the whole county."

Several environmental and civic activists say the Loudoun Board of Supervisors has ignored the water problem in its zeal to bring economic development to western Loudoun.

They point to a four-year study by the county's Department of Environmental Resources that concluded the groundwater supply in Loudoun is declining. The 250-page report, completed last year, recommended that development be "prohibited or substantially limited on lands which are critical to groundwater discharge."

Shortly afterward, county supervisors instead relaxed ground water-testing requirements for developers and eliminated the department that issued the study.

County officials contend that the department's demise was a budget-cutting move unrelated to the study. The hydrogeologist who wrote the report says he was fired because of pressure from the building industry.

"I was caught in a political cross-fire," said Brutus Cooper, the hydrogeologist. "I think they were afraid of the conclusion."

Cooper, now an environmental consultant, said the county should have followed up on his study with a comprehensive monitoring of wells.

"The water level has been going down over time. But with the absence of a second study, there is no definitive way of saying by how much," Cooper said. "It's not something that a nice rainfall can take care of."

County supervisors loosened the water-testing rules last summer. The old ordinance required developers to test the groundwater supply before submitting their construction plans for county approval. The measure was drafted in 1988 after several residents found their wells had dried up shortly after construction of nearby subdivisions.

The new ordinance still requires builders to test for water availability and quality, but it allows them to do so after their construction plans have been approved.

"This allows the developers to sell the lots prior to the test," said Jean Brown, a member of the North Fork-Goose Creek Watershed Project, a water conservation group that opposed the change. "It's now 'Home buyers beware.' "

But George Franklin, a county planning commissioner, said it makes sense to limit the drilling tests to subdivided lots that are under contract.

"There is no disadvantage or advantage to the developer," Franklin said. "We just didn't want to see all these holes in the ground for no good reason."

Many western Loudoun homeowners are reluctant to talk publicly about their own well water problems, for fear of lowering the resale value of their homes. But they readily cite examples of neighbors whose wells have gone dry and who have had to dig two or three new ones before hitting water. It costs about \$3,000 to dig a 375-foot well, so picking the wrong spot can get expensive.

"It's a hot topic of conversation between friends, but they'll never tell anyone else," said Joe Keating, of Waterford, one of the few residents who admitted having problems with his well.

"When it dries up, you go to the grocery store and buy drinking water and then you go to Leesburg {the largest town in Loudoun} and get five-gallon jugs for washing," Keating said.

As an afterthought, he added, "But it's a good well because water always comes back."