

# Groundwater Pumping From Building Sites

## Frequently Asked Questions

During this time of severe drought, our community is working hard to conserve water. So when community members observe water pumping from construction sites, they want to know what is happening. Here are answers and information to help address the most frequently asked questions we have heard.

**Q. What is the water that I see running into the storm drain from construction sites?**

A: During the construction of a basement or underground garage there is sometimes a shallow upper groundwater aquifer that must be temporarily pumped down to allow construction to move forward. This groundwater is not the same water that would be used for drinking.

**Q: Does the City regulate the pumping and discharge of this water?**

A: The City permits the discharge of this water to either the storm drain or the sanitary sewer, depending on the water quality. The water is sampled and tested for cloudiness, salinity and acidity. Only very clear, high quality water can go to the storm drain. Temporarily pumping this water is standard practice in areas with groundwater closer to the surface to allow construction to proceed, and no practical alternative has been found. Using the water for irrigation and dust control is possible, and the owners and construction managers are strongly encouraged to find uses for the water.

**Q: Given the high quality of the water and the severity of the drought, why does the City allow it to be “wasted” by discharging it into the storm drain system?**

A: The shallow water aquifer being pumped contributes to the flow of our creeks and to the Bay. The groundwater is part of the water cycle for the Bay and enhances the habitat and improves the quality of the creeks and lower South San

Francisco Bay. When the shallow aquifer is pumped from basement construction sites into storm drains, it travels a different path, but ends up in the same place: the lower South Bay. So, the water is not wasted, but rather is used to improve the Bay's habitat and ecosystem, whichever pathway it takes.

**Q: Can't this water be used for other purposes?**

A: The pumped water hasn't been disinfected or sufficiently tested to drink or use inside the home. Palo Alto's emergency drinking water wells tap into a much lower and more protected aquifer. However, the pumped water could be used for irrigation, dust control or similar uses. Palo Alto now requires that contractors have the pumping system fitted with valves and connections so that City crews and others can fill water trucks, street sweepers and other containers. For truck fill stations, the water is tested for acidity and salinity. Private parties can also fill trucks and containers.

The site owners and construction managers are encouraged to find more water users, but this will continue to be a small fraction of the total pumped water. Call 650-617-3103 for more information about accessing the fill stations.

The volume of water being pumped is large compared to pump truck capacities, but is too small and too shallow to impact the very deep and very large Palo Alto emergency ground water aquifer.

View our [map of FREE Water Filling Stations](#).

**Q. What happens after construction?**

A: In recent years, Palo Alto has required that structures be built as water tight so that groundwater flows around a building, rather than into it. But a number of older buildings leak, and water is pumped out of the building basement/garage into the storm drain or sanitary sewer. Palo Alto City Hall and 525 University are two of the largest "dischargers". We have looked at utilizing the water from City Hall, but it has not proven to be cost effective. With new water restrictions in place, this issue is being reexamined once again. However, the City Hall water

does go through the storm drain to San Francisquito Creek where it supports habitat, including for fish, especially in the summer when there is no rainfall.

**Q. What can I do if I see water being wasted?**

A: The City has hired a part-time Water Waste Coordinator who is specifically dedicated to drought response actions. Need to report a leak, runoff or waste? We have many communications means for you! Please let us know!

- Report water use incidents through the City's PaloAlto311 web or mobile app at [cityofpaloalto.org/services/paloalto311/](http://cityofpaloalto.org/services/paloalto311/) or go visit to [www.cityofpaloalto.org/water](http://www.cityofpaloalto.org/water) to access the link directly.
- Contact the City's Water Waste Coordinator at 650-496-6968 or [Drought@CityofPaloAlto.org](mailto:Drought@CityofPaloAlto.org) - or -
- Call Customer Service at (650) 329-2161 - or –
- Email [UtilitiesCommunications@CityofPaloAlto.org](mailto:UtilitiesCommunications@CityofPaloAlto.org) - or –
- Call Utilities Emergency Dispatch at (650) 329-2579