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New York's 'ace in the water hole'

The superdeep Lloyd aquifer is our backup supply if catastrophe strikes



Michael Dobie

michael.dobie@newsday.com

The Lloyd aquifer holds a special mystique for Long Islanders. Always has.

It's a superlative unto itself — our deepest and oldest aquifer, with our cleanest and coldest water. The mind boggles at the numbers that describe it.

It's 500 feet thick at its thickest in the southern part of central Suffolk County, and 1,800 feet below ground at its deepest. It takes hundreds of years for water to make its way from the surface down through layers of sand and clay to the Lloyd. Some of the water there is more than 8,000 years old.

We've always had a kind of hands-off attitude toward the Lloyd. We've viewed it as our aquatic rainy-day fund, a reserve to be tapped only when we need it. There are but a few dozen wells drilled into it, pri-

marily in Nassau, mostly in coastal communities such as Long Beach that really do need the Lloyd. They can't tap the Upper Glacial and Magothy aquifers — the two shallower aquifers from which most of Long Island gets its water — because of the intrusion of saltwater into the portions of those aquifers closest to our shores.

The state recognized the Lloyd's importance to Long Island in 1986 when it established a moratorium on new wells anywhere but in coastal communities.

New threats, however, loom. New York City is working on a plan to reopen some of its Queens wells, most of which are in other aquifers but four tap into the Lloyd. And the Bethpage Water District has applied to extend one of its Magothy wells into the Lloyd to compensate for the Grumman plume contaminating some of its wells.

The good news is that the state Department of Environmental Conservation, which



In May 2012, U.S. Geological Survey hydrologists in Bayville show how they use a probe to check for saltwater in a Lloyd aquifer well.

has oversight of the Lloyd, is proceeding very cautiously on these proposals. As it goes through its review, it would do well to consider a new take on the Lloyd offered by Assemb. Steven Englebright (D-Setauket), a geologist by training and one of our most thoughtful environmental voices.

Englebright says the Lloyd aquifer is a national and state security issue, and he's right. Consider the logic: Suppose there is a terrorist assault on the metro area's water supply,

whether from a dirty bomb or a direct attack that cripples the water transport system. Water would no longer be potable, or available, for millions of New Yorkers for who knows how long. Then what?

The Lloyd, Englebright says, is "our ace in the water hole." It's more or less sealed, an impregnable source of pristine water. In that respect, it's unique in the region. And we need to keep it that way.

"We should regard it as a tactical resource in the case of an

emergency," says Englebright, whose credentials and passion make him a strong candidate to replace the retiring Robert Sweeney (D-Lindenhurst) as chairman of the Assembly's important environmental conservation committee.

Englebright offered his thoughts on the Lloyd at a September meeting on homeland security attended by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo. The governor, Englebright says, took his remarks seriously. That's good.

So far, the DEC has granted no exemptions to its 28-year-old moratorium. Nor should it now, absent extreme hardship. Better that we work harder to preserve the quality of the drinking water we're tapping now. Bring together health departments and planners to develop better land-use practices that more effectively protect the other aquifers. Be more aggressive about reducing nutrients, pesticides and other pollutants threatening our water supply.

But leave the Lloyd alone . . . until we truly need it.

Michael Dobie is a member of Newsday's editorial board.

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