

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

Getting Up to Speed

GROUND WATER CONTAMINATION



Ground water contamination is nearly always the result of human activity. In areas where population density is high and human use of the land is intensive, ground water is especially vulnerable. Virtually any activity whereby chemicals or wastes may be released to the environment, either intentionally or accidentally, has the potential to pollute ground water. When ground water becomes contaminated, it is difficult and expensive to clean up.

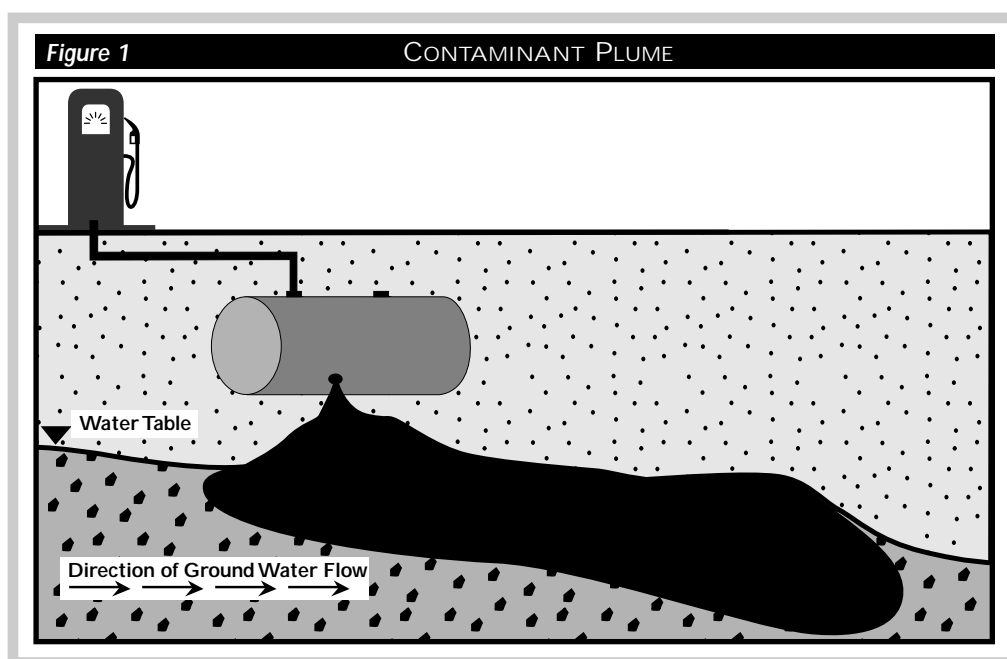
To begin to address pollution prevention or remediation, we must understand how surface waters and ground waters interrelate. Ground water and surface water are interconnected and can be fully understood and intelligently managed only when that fact is acknowledged. If there is a water supply well near a source of contamination, that well runs the risk of becoming contaminated. If there is a nearby river or stream, that water body may also become polluted by the ground water.

HOW DOES GROUND WATER BECOME CONTAMINATED?

Depending on its physical, chemical, and biological properties, a contaminant that has been released into the environment may move within an aquifer in the same manner that ground water moves. (Some contaminants, because of their phys-

ical or chemical properties, do not always follow ground water flow.) It is possible to predict, to some degree, the transport within an aquifer of those substances that move along with ground water flow. For example, both water and certain contaminants flow in the direction of the topography from recharge areas to discharge areas. Soils that are porous and permeable tend to transmit water and certain types of contaminants with relative ease to an aquifer below.

Just as ground water generally moves slowly, so do contaminants in ground water. Because of this slow movement, contaminants tend to remain concentrated in the form of a **plume** (see Figure 1) that flows along the same path as the ground water. The size and speed of the plume depend on the amount and type of contaminant, its solubility and density, and the velocity of the surrounding ground water.



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Ground water and contaminants can move rapidly through fractures in rocks. Fractured rock presents a unique problem in locating and controlling contaminants because the fractures are generally randomly spaced and do not follow the contours of the land surface or the hydraulic gradient. Contaminants can also move into the ground water system through macropores—root systems, animal burrows, abandoned wells, and other systems of holes and cracks that supply pathways for contaminants.

In areas surrounding pumping wells, the potential for contamination increases because water from the **zone of contribution**, a land area larger than the original recharge area, is drawn into the well and the surrounding aquifer. Some drinking water wells actually draw water from nearby streams, lakes, or rivers. Contaminants present in these surface waters can contribute contamination to the ground water system. Some wells rely on artificial recharge to increase the amount of water infiltrating an aquifer, often using water from storm runoff, irrigation, industrial processes, or treated sewage. In several cases, this practice has resulted in increased concentrations of nitrates, metals, microbes, or synthetic chemicals in the water.

Under certain conditions, pumping can also cause the ground water (and associated contaminants) from another aquifer to enter the one being pumped. This phenomenon is called **interaquifer leakage**. Thus, properly identifying and protecting the areas affected by well pumping is important to maintain ground water quality.

Generally, the greater the distance between a source of contamination and a ground water source, the more likely that natural processes will reduce the impacts of contamination. Processes such as oxidation, biological degradation (which sometimes renders contaminants less toxic), and adsorption (binding of materials to soil particles) may take place in the soil layers of the unsaturated zone and reduce the concentration of a contaminant before it reaches ground water. Even

contaminants that reach ground water directly, without passing through the unsaturated zone, can become less concentrated by dilution (mixing) with the ground water. However, because ground water usually moves slowly, contaminants generally undergo less dilution than when in surface water.

SOURCES OF GROUND WATER CONTAMINATION

Ground water can become contaminated from natural sources or numerous types of human activities. (See Tables 1 and 2 and Figure 1.) Residential, municipal, commercial, industrial, and agricultural activities can all affect ground water quality. Contaminants may reach ground water from activities on the land surface, such as releases or spills from stored industrial wastes; from sources below the land surface but above the water table, such as septic systems or leaking underground petroleum storage systems; from structures beneath the water table, such as wells; or from contaminated recharge water.

■ Natural Sources

Some substances found naturally in rocks or soils, such as iron, manganese, arsenic, chlorides, fluorides, sulfates, or radionuclides, can become dissolved in ground water. Other naturally occurring substances, such as decaying organic matter, can move in ground water as particles. Whether any of these substances appears in ground water depends on local conditions. Some substances may pose a health threat if consumed in excessive quantities; others may produce an undesirable odor, taste, or color. Ground water that contains unacceptable concentrations of these substances is not used for drinking water or other domestic water uses unless it is treated to remove these contaminants.

■ Septic Systems

One of the main causes of ground water contamination in the United States is the effluent (out-flow) from septic tanks, cesspools, and privies.

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Table 1 TYPICAL SOURCES OF POTENTIAL GROUND WATER CONTAMINATION BY LAND USE CATEGORY

Category	Contaminant Source	
Agriculture	Animal burial areas	Irrigation sites
	Animal feedlots	Manure spreading areas/pits
	Fertilizer storage/use	Pesticide storage/use
Commercial	Airports	Jewelry/metal plating
	Auto repair shops	Laundromats
	Boat yards	Medical institutions
	Construction areas	Paint shops
	Car washes	Photography establishments
	Cemeteries	Railroad tracks and yards
	Dry cleaners	Research laboratories
	Gas stations	Scrap and junkyards
	Golf courses	Storage tanks
Industrial	Asphalt plants	Petroleum production/storage
	Chemical manufacture/storage	Pipelines
	Electronics manufacture	Septage lagoons and sludge sites
	Electroplaters	Storage tanks
	Foundries/metal fabricators	Toxic and hazardous spills
	Machine/metalworking shops	Wells (operating/abandoned)
	Mining and mine drainage	Wood preserving facilities
Residential	Fuel oil	Septic systems, cesspools
	Furniture stripping/refinishing	Sewer lines
	Household hazardous products	Swimming pools (chemical storage)
	Household lawns	
Other	Hazardous waste landfills	Recycling/reduction facilities
	Municipal incinerators	Road deicing operations
	Municipal landfills	Road maintenance depots
	Municipal sewer lines	Storm water drains/basins
	Open burning sites	Transfer stations

Source: U.S. EPA, 1991a.

Approximately one-fourth of all homes in the United States rely on septic systems to dispose of their human wastes. Although each individual system releases a relatively small amount of waste into the ground, the large number and widespread use of these systems makes them a serious contamination source. Septic systems that are improperly sited, designed, constructed, or maintained can contaminate ground water with bacteria, viruses, nitrates, detergents, oils, and chemicals. Along with these contaminants are the commercially available septic system cleaners containing syn-

thetic organic chemicals (such as 1,1,1-trichloroethane or methylene chloride). These cleaners can contaminate water supply wells and interfere with natural decomposition processes in septic systems.

Most, if not all, state and local regulations require specific separation distances between septic systems and drinking water wells. In addition, computer models have been developed to calculate suitable distances and densities.

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■ **Improper Disposal of Hazardous Waste**

Hazardous waste should always be disposed of properly, that is to say, by a licensed hazardous waste handler or through municipal hazardous waste collection days. Many chemicals should not be disposed of in household septic systems, including oils (e.g., cooking, motor), lawn and garden chemicals, paints and paint thinners, disinfectants, medicines, photographic chemicals, and swimming pool chemicals. Similarly, many substances used in industrial processes should not be disposed of in drains at the workplace because they could contaminate a drinking water source. Companies should train employees in the proper use and disposal of all chemicals used on site. The many different types and the large quantities of chemicals used at industrial locations make proper disposal of wastes especially important for ground water protection.

■ **Releases and Spills from Stored Chemicals and Petroleum Products**

Underground and aboveground storage tanks are commonly used to store petroleum products and other chemical substances. For example, many homes have underground heating oil tanks. Many businesses and municipal highway departments also store gasoline, diesel fuel, fuel oil, or chemicals in on-site tanks. Industries use storage tanks to hold chemicals used in industrial processes or to store hazardous wastes for pickup by a licensed hauler. Approximately 4 million underground storage tanks exist in the United States and, over the years, the contents of many of these tanks have leaked and spilled into the environment.

If an underground storage tank develops a leak, which commonly occurs as the tank ages and corrodes, its contents can migrate through the soil and reach the ground water. Tanks that meet federal/state standards for new and upgraded systems are less likely to fail, but they are not foolproof. Abandoned underground tanks pose another problem because their location is often unknown. Aboveground storage tanks can also pose a threat to ground water if a spill or leak occurs and adequate barriers are not in place.

Improper chemical storage, sloppy materials handling, and poor-quality containers can be major threats to ground water. Tanker trucks and train cars pose another chemical storage hazard. Each year, approximately 16,000 chemical spills occur from trucks, trains, and storage tanks, often when materials are being transferred. At the site of an accidental spill, the chemicals are often diluted with water and then washed into the soil, increasing the possibility of ground water contamination.

■ **Landfills**

Solid waste is disposed of in thousands of municipal and industrial landfills throughout the country. Chemicals that should be disposed of in hazardous waste landfills sometimes end up in municipal landfills. In addition, the disposal of many household wastes is not regulated.

Once in the landfill, chemicals can leach into the ground water by means of precipitation and surface runoff. New landfills are required to have clay or synthetic liners and leachate (liquid from a landfill containing contaminants) collection systems to protect ground water. Most older landfills, however, do not have these safeguards. Older landfills were often sited over aquifers or close to surface waters and in permeable soils with shallow water tables, enhancing the potential for leachate to contaminate ground water. Closed landfills can continue to pose a ground water contamination threat if they are not capped with an impermeable material (such as clay) before closure to prevent the leaching of contaminants by precipitation.

■ **Surface Impoundments**

Surface impoundments are relatively shallow ponds or lagoons used by industries and municipalities to store, treat, and dispose of liquid wastes. As many as 180,000 surface impoundments exist in the United States. Like landfills, new surface impoundment facilities are required to have liners, but even these liners sometimes leak.

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Product	Toxic or Hazardous Components
Antifreeze (gasoline or coolants systems)	Methanol, ethylene glycol
Automatic transmission fluid	Petroleum distillates, xylene
Battery acid (electrolyte)	Sulfuric acid
Degreasers for driveways and garages	Petroleum solvents, alcohols, glycol ether
Degreasers for engines and metal	Chlorinated hydrocarbons, toluene, phenols, dichloroperchloroethylene
Engine and radiator flushes	Petroleum solvents, ketones, butanol, glycol ether
Hydraulic fluid (brake fluid)	Hydrocarbons, fluorocarbons
Motor oils and waste oils	Hydrocarbons
Gasoline and jet fuel	Hydrocarbons
Diesel fuel, kerosene, #2 heating oil	Hydrocarbons
Grease, lubes	Hydrocarbons
Rustproofers	Phenols, heavy metals
Car wash detergents	Alkyl benzene sulfonates
Car waxes and polishes	Petroleum distillates, hydrocarbons
Asphalt and roofing tar	Hydrocarbons
Paints, varnishes, stains, dyes	Heavy metals, toluene
Paint and lacquer thinner	Acetone, benzene, toluene, butyl acetate, methyl ketones
Paint and varnish removers, deglossers	Methylene chloride, toluene, acetone, xylene, ethanol, benzene, methanol
Paint brush cleaners	Hydrocarbons, toluene, acetone, methanol, glycol ethers, methyl ethyl ketones
Floor and furniture strippers	Xylene
Metal polishes	Petroleum distillates, isopropanol, petroleum naphtha
Laundry soil and stain removers	Hydrocarbons, benzene, trichloroethylene, 1,1,1-trichloroethane
Other solvents	Acetone, benzene
Rock salt	Sodium concentration
Refrigerants	1,1,2-trichloro-1,2,2-trifluoroethane
Bug and tar removers	Xylene, petroleum distillates
Household cleansers, oven cleaners	Xylenols, glycol ethers, isopropanol
Drain cleaners	1,1,1-trichloroethane
Toilet cleaners	Xylene, sulfonates, chlorinated phenols
Cesspool cleaners	Tetrachloroethylene, dichlorobenzene, methylene chloride
Disinfectants	Cresol, xylenols
Pesticides (all types)	Naphthalene, phosphorus, xylene, chloroform, heavy metals, chlorinated hydrocarbons
Photochemicals	Phenols, sodium sulfite, cyanide, silver halide, potassium bromide
Printing ink	Heavy metals, phenol-formaldehyde
Wood preservatives (creosote)	Pentachlorophenols
Swimming pool chlorine	Sodium hypochlorite
Lye or caustic soda	Sodium hydroxide
Jewelry cleaners	Sodium cyanide

Source: "Natural Resources Facts: Household Hazardous Wastes," Fact Sheet No. 88-3, Department of Natural Science, University of Rhode Island, August 1988.

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■ Sewers and Other Pipelines

Sewer pipes carrying wastes sometimes leak fluids into the surrounding soil and ground water. Sewage consists of organic matter, inorganic salts, heavy metals, bacteria, viruses, and nitrogen. Other pipelines carrying industrial chemicals and oil brine have also been known to leak, especially when the materials transported through the pipes are corrosive.

■ Pesticide and Fertilizer Use

Millions of tons of fertilizers and pesticides (e.g., herbicides, insecticides, rodenticides, fungicides, avicides) are used annually in the United States for crop production. In addition to farmers, homeowners, businesses (e.g., golf courses), utilities, and municipalities use these chemicals. A number of these pesticides and fertilizers (some highly toxic) have entered and contaminated ground water following normal, registered use. Some pesticides remain in soil and water for many months to many years. Another potential source of ground water contamination is animal wastes that percolate into the ground from farm feedlots. Feedlots should be properly sited and wastes should be removed at regular intervals.

Between 1985 and 1992, EPA's Office of Pesticides and Toxic Substances and Office of Water conducted a National Pesticide Survey to determine the number of drinking water wells nationwide that contain pesticides and nitrates and the concentration of these substances. The survey also analyzed the factors associated with contamination of drinking water wells by pesticides and nitrates. The survey, which included samples from more than 1,300 public community and rural domestic water supply wells, found that approximately 3.6 percent of the wells contained concentrations of nitrates above the federal maximum contaminant level, and that over half of the wells contained nitrates above the survey's minimum reporting limit for nitrate (0.15 mg/L).

The survey also reported that approximately 0.8 percent of the wells tested contained pesticides at

levels higher than federal maximum contaminant levels or health advisory levels. Only 10 percent of the wells classified as rural were actually located on farms. There is a higher incidence of contamination by agricultural chemicals in farm wells used for drinking water.

After further analysis, EPA estimated that for the wells that contain pesticides, a significant percentage probably contain chemical concentrations that exceed the federal health-based limits (e.g., maximum contaminant levels or health advisory levels). Approximately 14.6 percent of the wells tested contained levels of one or more pesticides above the minimum reporting limit set in the survey. The most common pesticides found were atrazine and metabolites (breakdown products) of dimethyl tetrachloroterephthalate (DCPA, commonly known as Dacthal), which is used in many utility easement weed-control programs and for lawn care.

■ Drainage Wells

Drainage wells are used in wet areas to help drain water and transport it to deeper soils. These wells may contain agricultural chemicals and bacteria.

■ Injection Wells/Floor Drains

Injection wells are used to collect storm water runoff, collect spilled liquids, dispose of wastewater, and dispose of industrial, commercial, and utility wastes. These wells are regulated by the U.S. EPA's Underground Injection Control Program. In New England, these wells may not be used to inject hazardous wastes from industrial, commercial, and utility operations. The injection wells used in this region are typically shallow and include sumps and dry wells used to handle storm water.

Floor drains were historically used by businesses to handle spills. Today, if a business operates or handles waste fluids that drain to a septic system, dry well, or floor drain, it is required to submit information regarding its operation to the U.S. EPA or its state environmental protection agency. Disposal wells that pose threats to drinking water supplies are prohibited and must be closed, con-

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nected to a public sewage system, or connected to a storage tank.

■ Improperly Constructed Wells

Problems associated with improperly constructed wells can result in ground water contamination when contaminated surface or ground water is introduced into the well.

■ Improperly Abandoned Wells

These wells can act as a conduit through which contaminants can reach an aquifer if the well casing has been removed, as is often done, or if the casing is corroded. In addition, some people use abandoned wells to dispose of wastes such as used motor oil. These wells may reach into an aquifer that serves drinking supply wells. Abandoned exploratory wells (e.g., for gas, oil, or coal) or test hole wells are usually uncovered and are also a potential conduit for contaminants.

■ Active Drinking Water Supply Wells

Poorly constructed wells can result in ground water contamination. Construction problems, such as faulty casings, inadequate covers, or lack of concrete pads, allow outside water and any accompanying contaminants to flow into the well. Sources of such contaminants can be surface runoff or wastes from farm animals or septic systems. Contaminated fill packed around a well can also degrade well water quality. Well construction problems are more likely to occur in older wells that were in place prior to the establishment of well construction standards and in domestic and livestock wells.

■ Poorly Constructed Irrigation Wells

These wells can allow contaminants to enter ground water. Often pesticides and fertilizers are applied in the immediate vicinity of wells on agricultural land.

■ Mining Activities

Active and abandoned mines can contribute to ground water contamination. Precipitation can leach soluble minerals from the mine wastes

(known as spoils or tailings) into the ground water below. These wastes often contain metals, acid, minerals, and sulfides. Abandoned mines are often used as wells and waste pits, sometimes simultaneously. In addition, mines are sometimes pumped to keep them dry; the pumping can cause an upward migration of contaminated ground water, which may be intercepted by a well.

EFFECTS OF GROUND WATER CONTAMINATION

Contamination of ground water can result in poor drinking water quality, loss of water supply, degraded surface water systems, high cleanup costs, high costs for alternative water supplies, and/or potential health problems.

The consequences of contaminated ground water or degraded surface water are often serious. For example, estuaries that have been impacted by high nitrogen from ground water sources have lost critical shellfish habitats. In terms of water supply, in some instances, ground water contamination is so severe that the water supply must be abandoned as a source of drinking water. In other cases, the ground water can be cleaned up and used again, if the contamination is not too severe and if the municipality is willing to spend a good deal of money. Follow-up water quality monitoring is often required for many years.

Because ground water generally moves slowly, contamination often remains undetected for long periods of time. This makes cleanup of a contaminated water supply difficult, if not impossible. If a cleanup is undertaken, it can cost thousands to millions of dollars.

Once the contaminant source has been controlled or removed, the contaminated ground water can be treated in one of several ways:

- Containing the contaminant to prevent migration.
- Pumping the water, treating it, and returning it to the aquifer.

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- Leaving the ground water in place and treating either the water or the contaminant.
- Allowing the contaminant to attenuate (reduce) naturally (with monitoring), following the implementation of an appropriate source control.

Selection of the appropriate remedial technology is based on site-specific factors and often takes into account cleanup goals based on potential risk that are protective of human health and the environment. The technology selected is one that will achieve those cleanup goals. Different technologies are effective for different types of contaminants, and several technologies are often combined to achieve effective treatment. The effectiveness of treatment depends in part on local hydrogeological conditions, which must be evaluated prior to selecting a treatment option.

Given the difficulty and high costs of cleaning up a contaminated aquifer, some communities choose to abandon existing wells and use other water sources, if available. Using alternative supplies is probably more expensive than obtaining drinking water from the original source. A temporary and expensive solution is to purchase bottled water, but it is not a realistic long-term solution for a community's drinking water supply problem. A community might decide to install new wells in a different area of the aquifer. In this case, appropriate siting and monitoring of the new wells are critical to ensure that contaminants do not move into the new water supplies.

Potential Health Problems

A number of microorganisms and thousands of synthetic chemicals have the potential to contaminate ground water. Drinking water containing bacteria and viruses can result in illnesses such as hepatitis, cholera, or giardiasis. Methemoglobinemia or "blue baby syndrome," an illness affecting infants, can be caused by drinking water that is high in nitrates. Benzene, a component of

gasoline, is a known human carcinogen. The serious health effects of lead are well known—learning disabilities in children; nerve, kidney, and liver problems; and pregnancy risks. Concentrations in drinking water of these and other substances are regulated by federal and state laws. Hundreds of other chemicals, however, are not yet regulated, and many of their health effects are unknown or not well understood. Preventing contaminants from reaching the ground water is the best way to reduce the health risks associated with poor drinking water quality.

REGULATIONS TO PROTECT GROUND WATER

Several federal laws help protect ground water quality. The **Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA)** established three drinking water source protection programs: the Wellhead Protection Program, Sole Source Aquifer Program, and the Source Water Assessment Program. It also called for regulation of the use of underground injection wells for waste disposal and provided EPA and the states with the authority to ensure that drinking water supplied by public water systems meets minimum health standards. The **Clean Water Act** regulates ground water that is shown to have a connection with surface water. It sets standards for allowable pollutant discharges to surface water. The **Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA)** regulates treatment, storage, and disposal of hazardous and nonhazardous wastes. The **Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA, or Superfund)** authorizes the government to clean up contamination or sources of potential contamination from hazardous waste sites or chemical spills, including those that threaten drinking water supplies. CERCLA includes a "community right-to-know" provision. The **Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA)** regulates pesticide use. The **Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA)** regulates manufactured chemicals.



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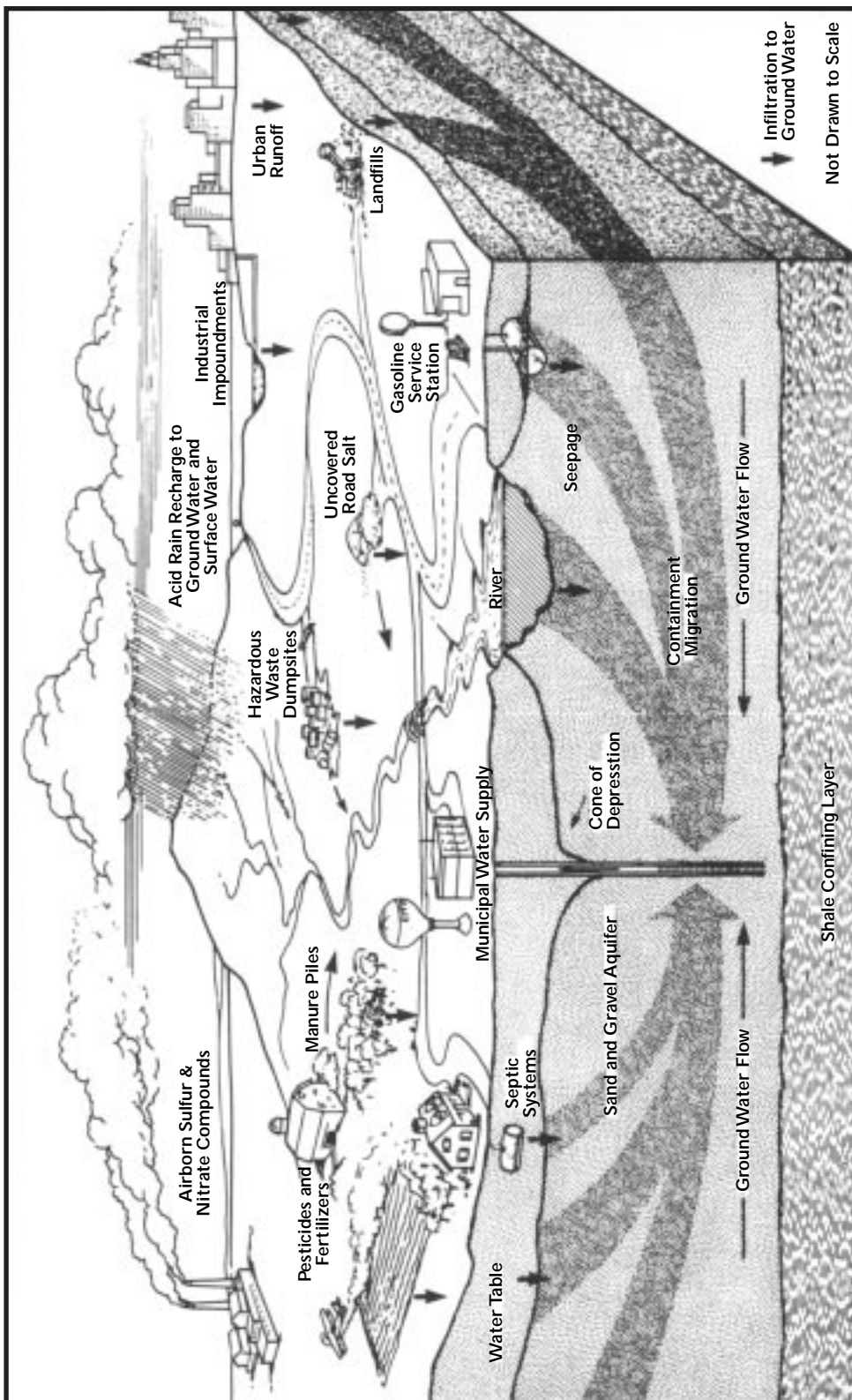
KEY TERMS

- Clean Water Act
- Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA, or Superfund)
- Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA)
- Interaquifer Leakage
- Plume
- Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA)
- Safe Drinking Water Act
- Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA)
- Zone of Contribution

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Figure 2

SOME POTENTIAL SOURCES OF GROUND WATER CONTAMINATION



Source: Paly, Melissa and Lee Steppacher. The Power to Protect: Three Stories about Ground Water. U.S.E.P.A. Massachusetts Audubon Society and NEIWPCC.