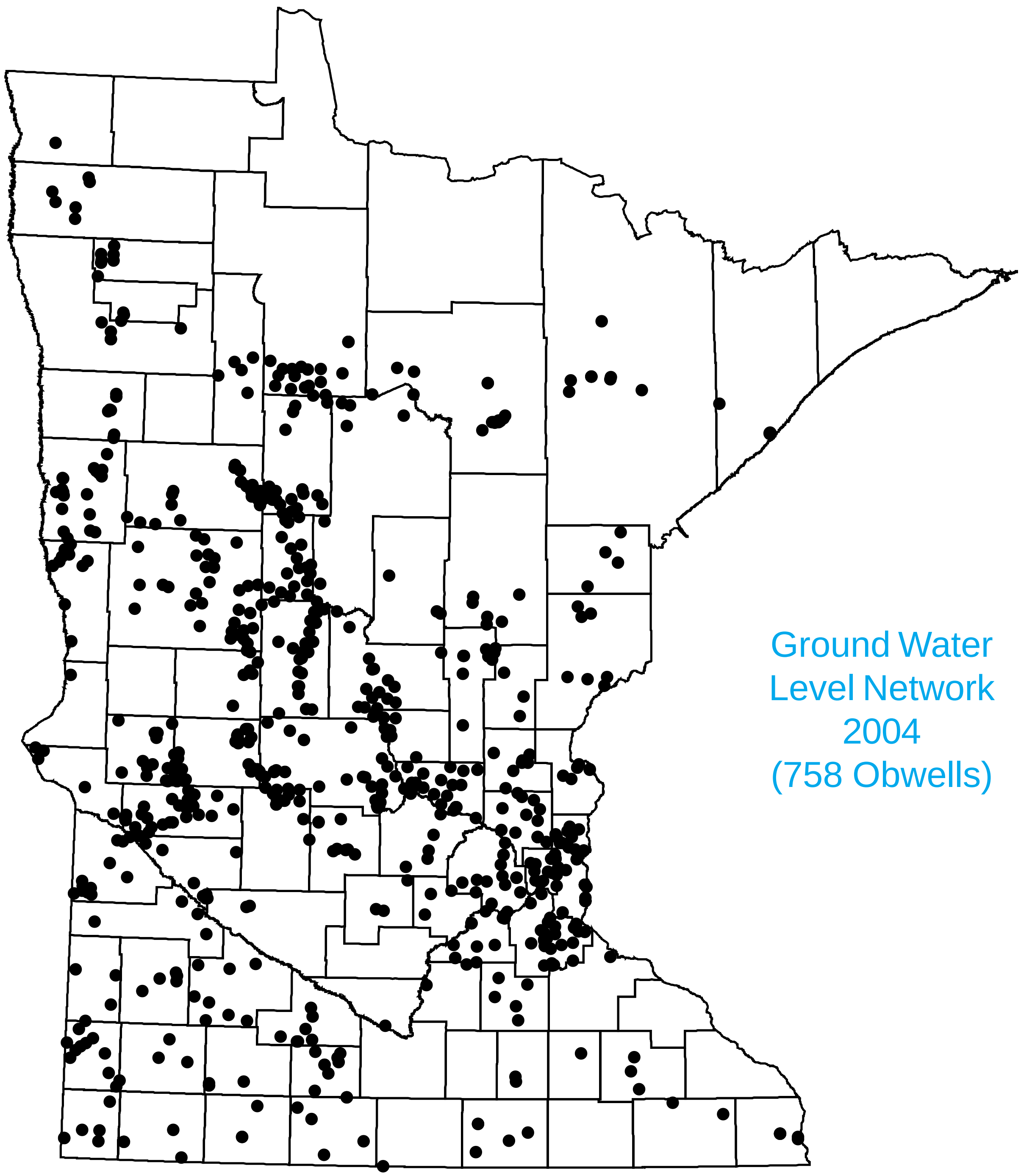
chapter three

ground water

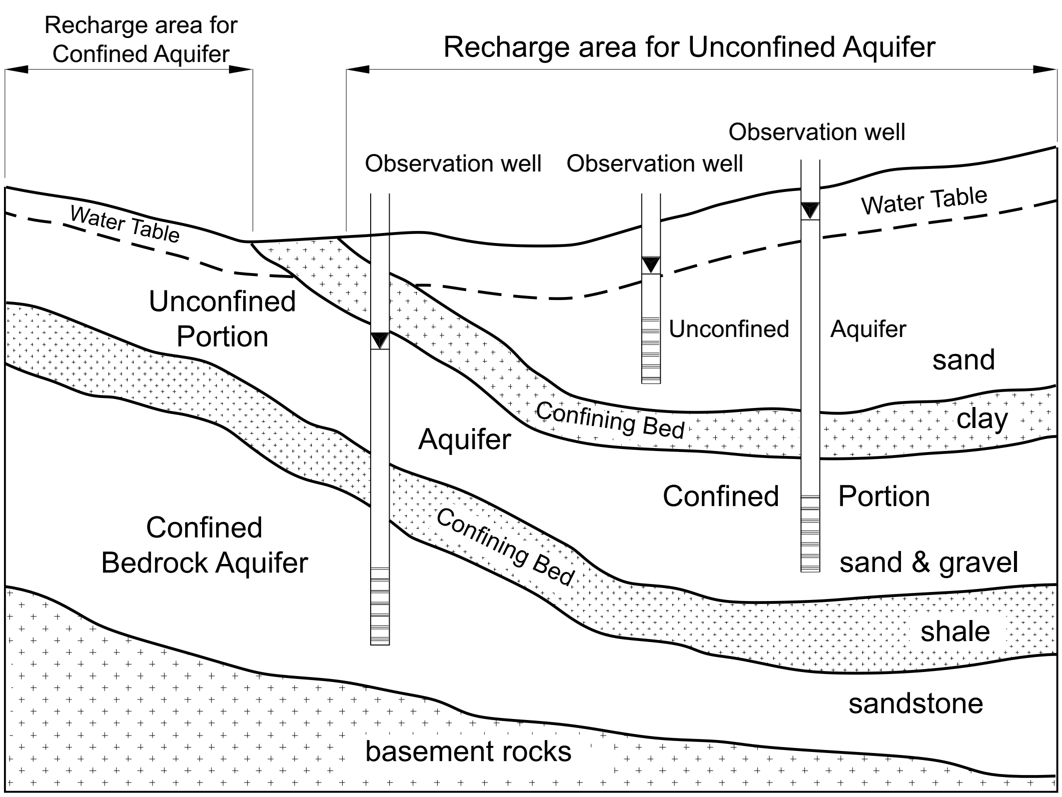


Introduction

Monitoring of ground water levels in Minnesota began in 1942 and, starting in 1947, was expanded by a cooperative program between the DNR and the United States Geological Survey (USGS). The number of observation wells (obwells) has remained constant at approximately 750 obwells over the last few water years. Data from these wells are used to assess ground water resources, determine long term trends, interpret impacts of pumping and climate, plan for water conservation, evaluate water conflicts and otherwise manage the water resource. Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) and other cooperators, under agreements with DNR Waters, measure the wells periodically and report the readings to DNR Waters as part of the Ground Water Level Program. Readings are also obtained from volunteers and electronically at other locations.

Figure 1

Hypothetical Unconfined and Confined Aquifer Systems



Aquifers

An aquifer is a water-saturated geologic formation which is sufficiently permeable to transmit economic quantities of water to wells and springs. Aquifers may exist under unconfined or confined conditions (Figure 1).

UNCONFINED AQUIFERS - In an unconfined aquifer, the ground water surface that separates the unsaturated and saturated zones is called the water table. The water table is exposed to the atmosphere through openings in the overlying unsaturated geologic materials. The water level inside the casing of a well placed in an unconfined aquifer will be at the same level as the water table. Unconfined aquifers may also be called water table or surficial aquifers.

For most of Minnesota, these aquifers are composed of glacial sand and gravel. Their areal extent is not always well defined nor is their hydraulic connection documented. They are often locally isolated pockets of glacial outwash deposited over an area of acres to square miles. Recharge to these units may be limited to rainfall over the area of the aquifer or augmented by ground water inflow. Consequently, care must be taken in extrapolating water table conditions based upon the measurements of a single water table well.

CONFINED AQUIFERS - When an aquifer is separated from the ground surface and atmosphere by a material of low permeability, the aquifer is confined. The water in a confined aquifer is under greater pressure than atmosphere, and therefore, when a well is installed in a confined aquifer, the water level in the well casing rises above the top of the aquifer. This aquifer type includes buried drift aquifers and most bedrock aquifers.

Buried drift aquifers are composed of glacially deposited sands and gravels, over which a confining layer of clay or clay till was deposited. Their areal extent and hydraulic connections beneath the ground surface are often unknown; therefore, an obwell placed in one of these units may be representing an isolated system. Ground water investigations involving buried drift aquifers require considerable effort to evaluate the local interconnection between these aquifer units.

Bedrock aquifers are, as the name implies, geologic bedrock units which have porosity and permeability such that they meet the definition of an aquifer. Water in these units is either located in the spaces between the rock grains (such as sand grains) or in fractures within the more solid rock. While these aquifers can be unconfined, the ones measured in the obwell network are generally bounded above and below by low-permeability confining units. Unlike buried drift aquifers, bedrock aquifers are fairly well defined in terms of their areal extent and the units are considered to be connected hydrologically throughout their occurrence.

Seasonal climatic changes affect the water levels in aquifer systems. Recharge, which is characterized by rising water levels, results as snow melt and precipitation infiltrate the soil and percolate to the saturated zone. Drawdown, characterized by the lowering of water levels, results as plants transpire soil water, ground water discharges into lakes, springs and streams, and/or well pumping withdraws water from the aquifer. An unconfined aquifer generally responds more quickly to these changes than a confined aquifer since the water table is in more direct contact with the surface. However, the magnitude of change in water levels will usually be more pronounced in a confined aquifer.

Statewide Summary

The remainder of this chapter discusses the ground water levels in unconfined and confined aquifers during Water Years 2003 (WY03) and 2004 (WY04). This discussion focuses on a comparison of water levels in WY03 and WY04 to the water levels over the period of record for the ground water level monitoring wells (obwells) analyzed in this report. Hydrographs of representative obwells illustrate the analysis. To achieve meaningful comparisons, representative obwells were chosen from the network based on their length of record and their geographical location. Such periods of record are generally from 10 to 40 years.

During these water years, the DNR monitored water levels in approximately 750 wells throughout the state. Water levels are usually recorded monthly from March through November. Figures 2, 5 and 7 show the locations of these wells, identifying those that were placed in unconfined (water table) aquifers, in buried drift aquifers and in bedrock aquifers.

Unconfined Aquifers (Water Table)

While drainage from an unconfined aquifer continues throughout the winter, recharge is restricted. In general, winter precipitation is stored as snowpack, and frozen soil prevents or slows the infiltration and percolation of spring snow melt. By the end of winter, water tables would be expected to be at a low point. As the soil thaws and spring rains occur, the water table aquifers are recharged resulting in the higher water tables.

The approximate location of the water table wells used in this report are shown in Figure 3. The wells identified by number are also the subject wells in Figure 4. Figure 4A shows the standard hydrographs for these wells over the entire period of record. Figure 4B shows hydrographs for the two-year period under discussion. Also shown on Figure 4B is the monthly precipitation recorded at a station near each well.

The representative unconfined obwells reflect the precipitation patterns throughout the state overlaid on the normal seasonal fluctuations. In WY04, the response of unconfined aquifer water levels to high precipitation in late summer was not consistent statewide.

Figure 2

Unconfined Observation Wells

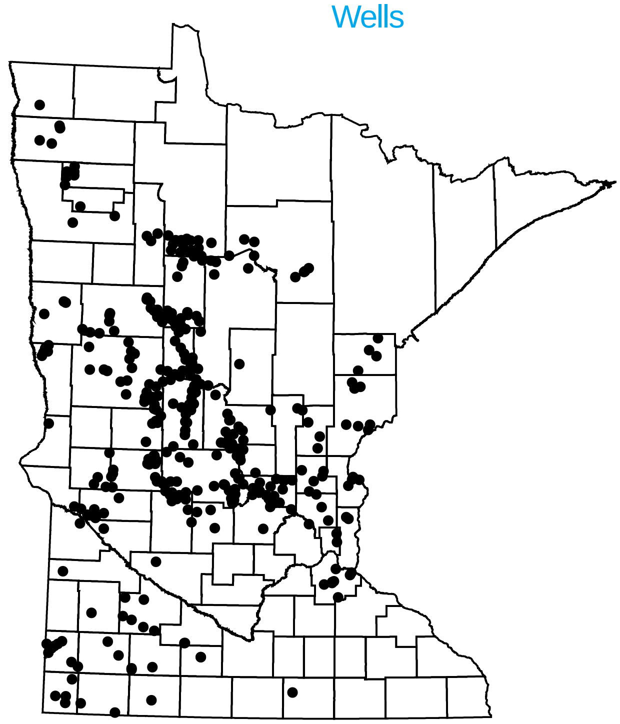


Figure 3

Location of Representative Unconfined and Buried Drift Wells

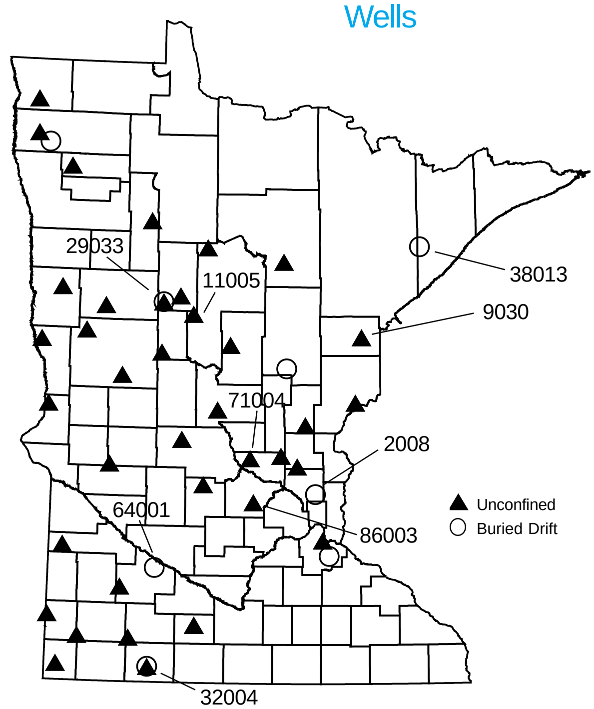
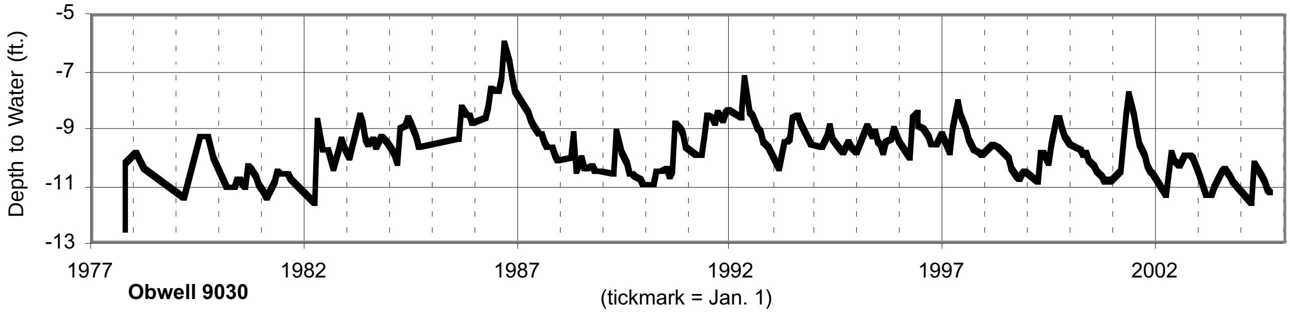
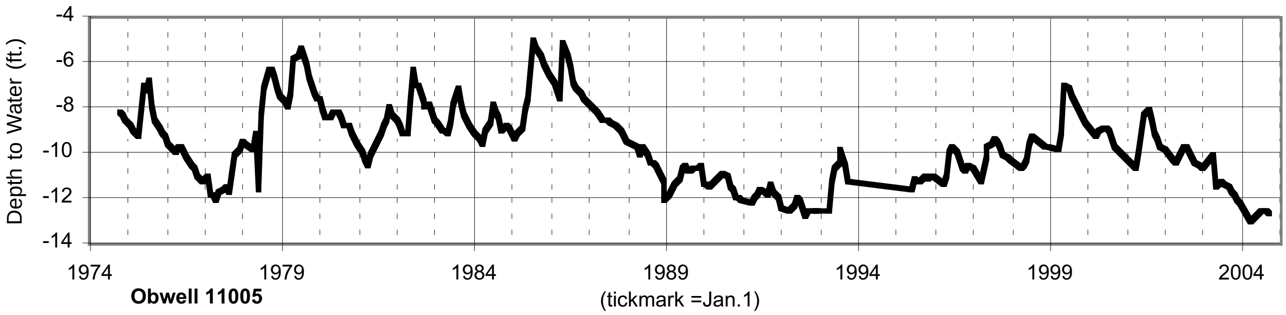


Figure 4A

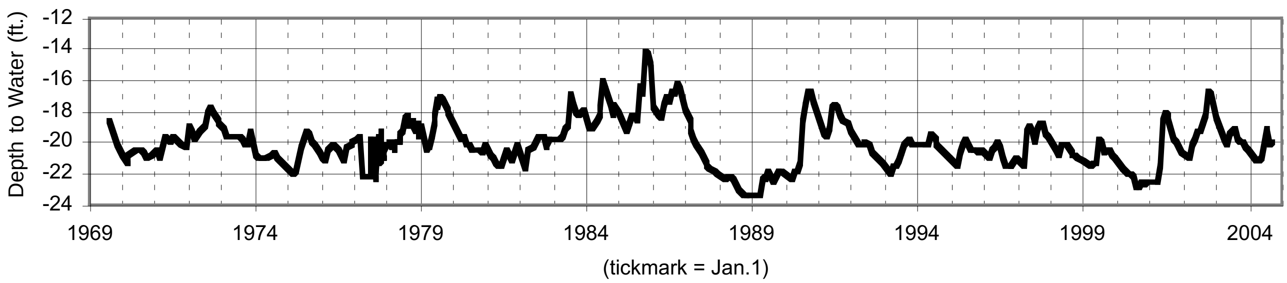
Unconfined (Water Table) Obwells



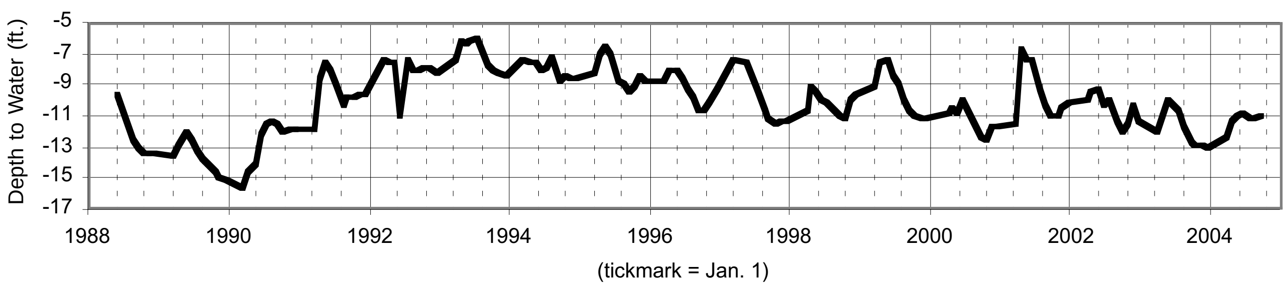
Obwell 9030



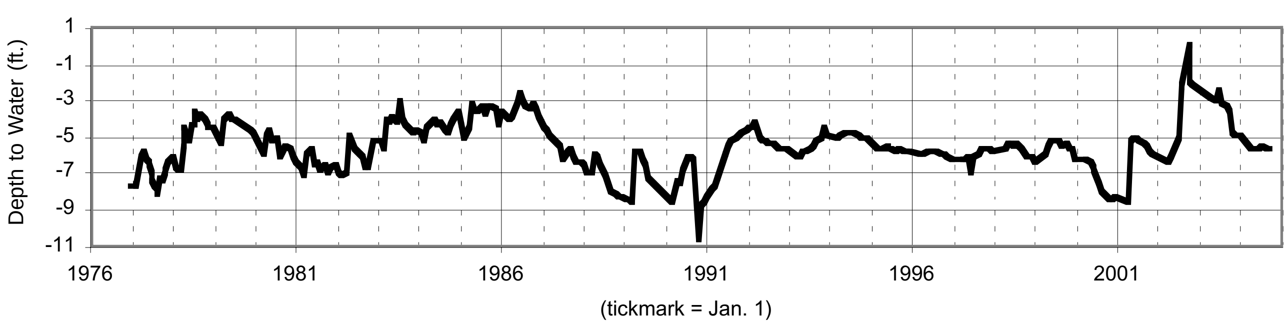
Obwell 11005



Obwell 71004



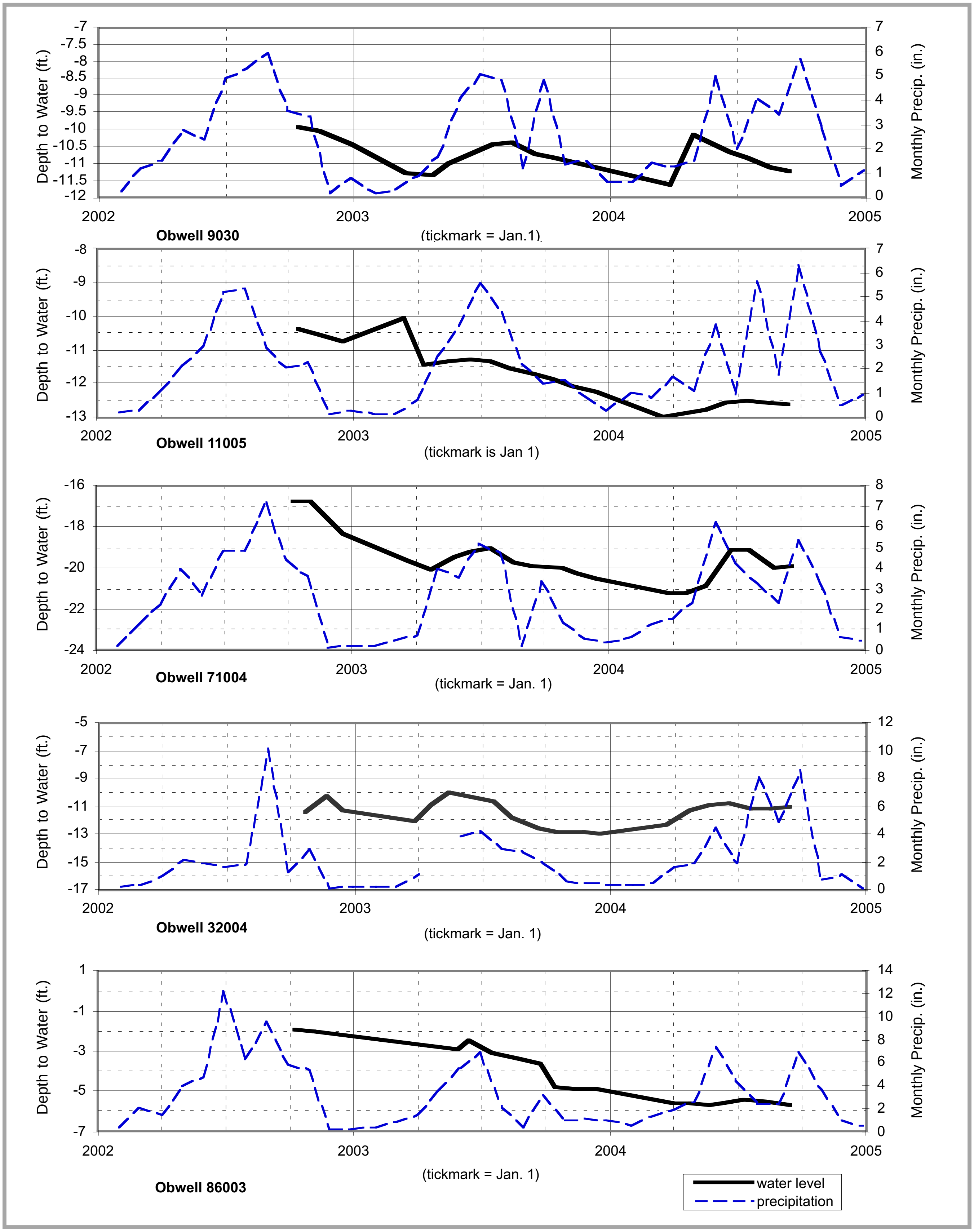
Obwell 32004



Obwell 86003

Figure 4B

Unconfined (Water Table) Obwells



Confined Aquifers

Changes in precipitation patterns are usually not reflected in confined aquifers until after the extreme (dry or wet) precipitation pattern has been in existence for an extended period or has ended. This is due primarily to the presence of an overlying confining bed, which inhibits a direct response to the precipitation amounts. Observation wells in the confined aquifers reflect that general rule.

Buried Drift Aquifers

Under confined conditions, these aquifers generally respond more slowly to seasonal inputs from snow melt and precipitation than water table aquifers. However, buried drift aquifers can be near the surface with their extent poorly defined and with some connection to adjacent unconfined aquifers. As a result, response of buried drift aquifers to recharge is determined by individual characteristics. The response is therefore difficult to predict without additional data.

The approximate location of the buried drift wells selected for analysis are among the numbered wells shown in Figure 3. The hydrographs for these wells for the entire period of record are shown in Figure 6.

In the northern portion of the state, buried drift water levels continue the downward trend established in the previous water years. In central Minnesota a slight downward trend is also noticeable. In the southern portion of the state no trend is discernable, but fewer extremes, high and low, are evident.

Buried drift levels in the Twin Cities Metro area are muddled by induced recharge to the bedrock system. That is, most public supply is pumped from the underlying bedrock aquifers, which causes a downward draw on buried drift water levels and an enhanced leakage to the bedrock.

Figure 5

Buried Drift Observation Wells

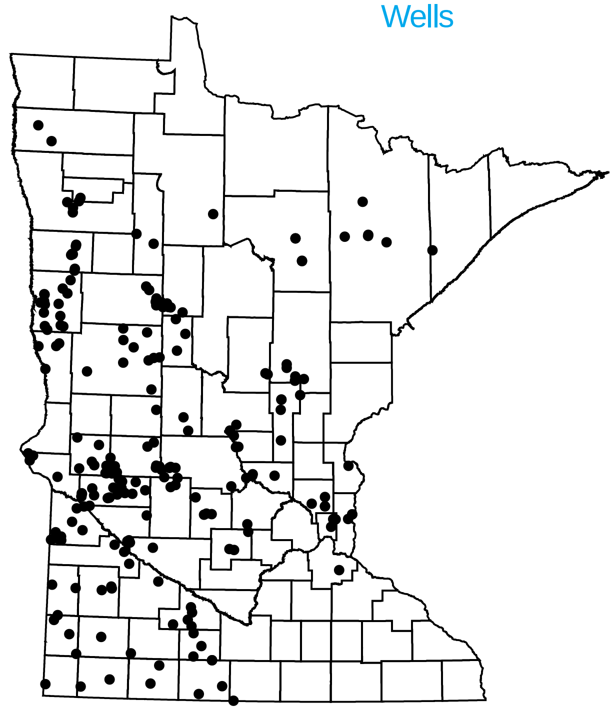
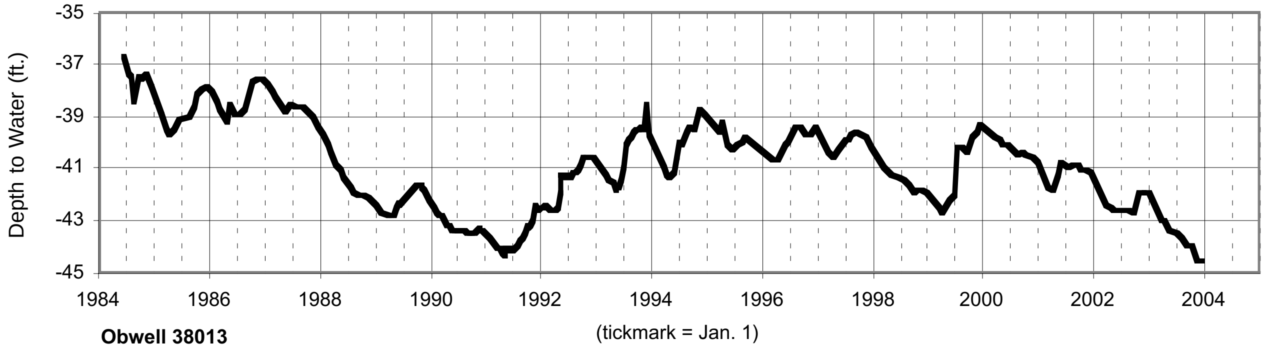
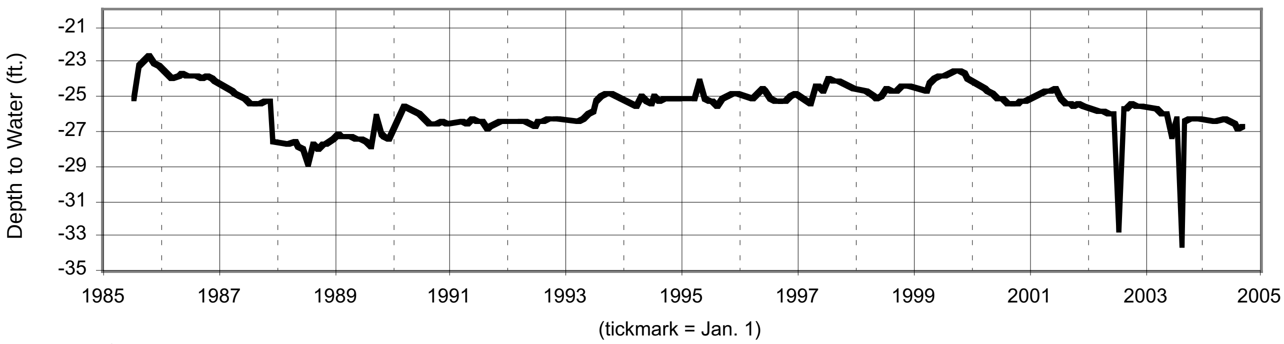


Figure 6

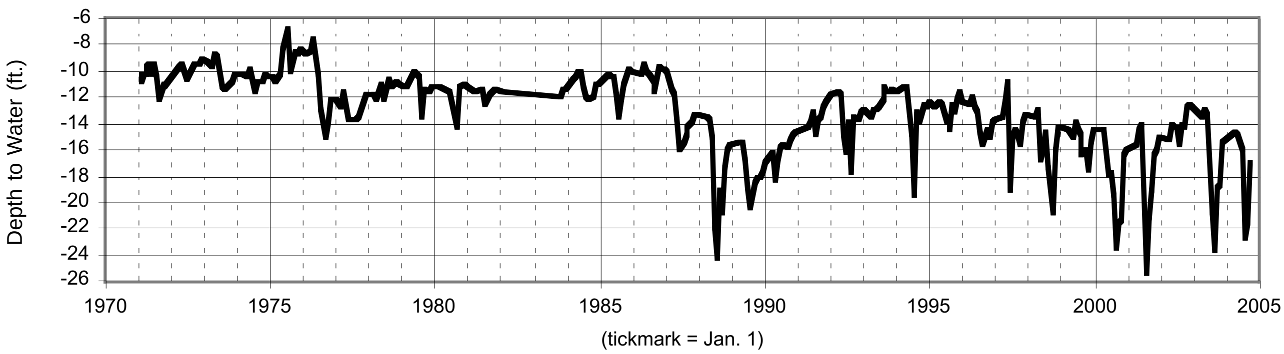
Buried Drift (Confined) Obwells



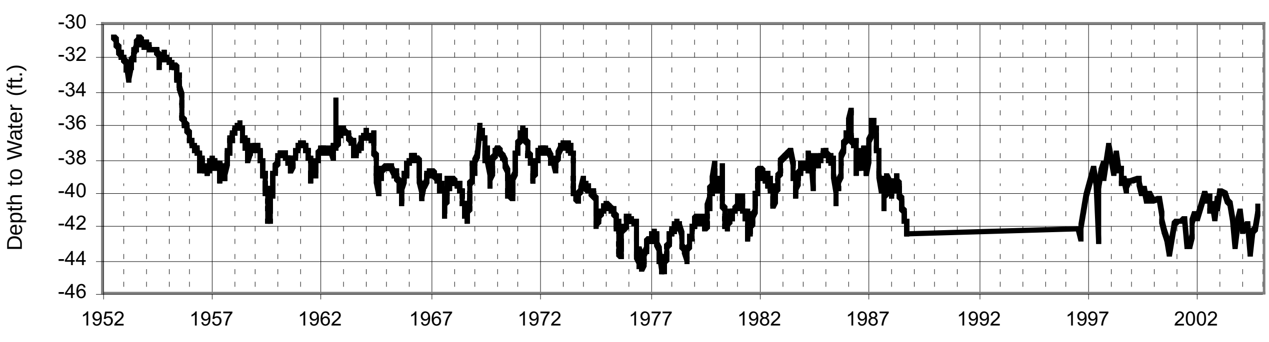
Obwell 38013



Obwell 29033



Obwell 2008



Obwell 64001

Bedrock - Prairie du Chien-Jordan Aquifer

The Prairie du Chien-Jordan aquifer is usually considered to be in a confined condition. However, locally, it may respond as an unconfined aquifer in situations where the aquifer is adjacent to unconfined materials; for example, where buried glacial valleys intersect the aquifer or where the aquifer is the first bedrock under surficial, unconfined sands.

Locations of the Prairie du Chien-Jordan wells selected for this report are shown in Figure 8. Wells identified by number are those wells for which hydrographs are shown in Figure 9. Prairie du Chien-Jordan water levels reflect the intensity of human use for water supply. In areas of higher use, Prairie du Chien-Jordan wells show a gradual decline in water levels. Annual pumping cycles are clearly visible in these hydrographs.

Figure 8

Location of Representative Prairie du Chien-Jordan and Mt. Simon Wells

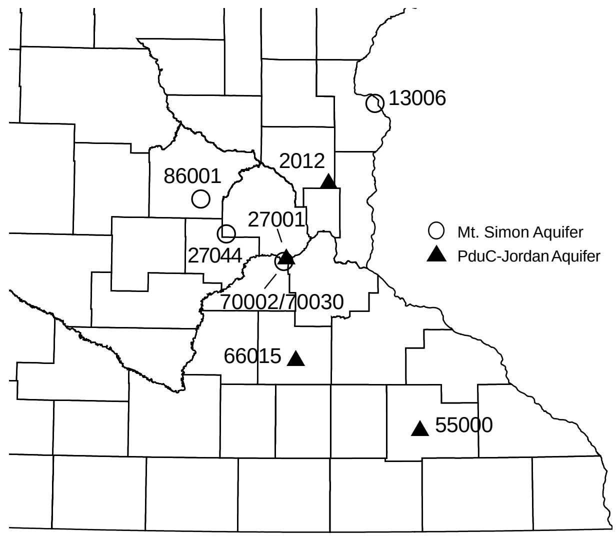
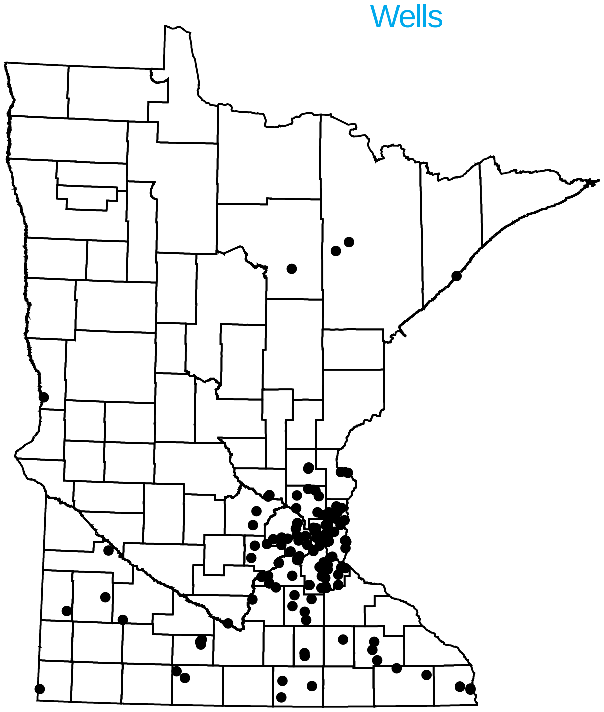


Figure 7

Bedrock Observation Wells



Bedrock - Mt. Simon Aquifer

With some exceptions, the Mt. Simon is a confined aquifer. It may respond as an unconfined aquifer in the atypical instances where the aquifer is adjacent to unconfined materials, such as along deeply incised buried glacial valleys.

Locations of the Mt. Simon wells used for this summary are shown in Figure 8. The wells identified by number are also the wells whose hydrographs appear in Figure 10. Figure 10 shows the standard hydrographs for these selected wells over their entire period of record. The trace of Obwell 70002/70030 shows the impacts of human use on this aquifer in an area where, during the period of this report, water withdrawal from this aquifer increased in order to protect surface water features. This hydrograph illustrates the local result of that increased use. The impact of water withdrawal from the Mt. Simon over the entire basin has been to reduce levels on the outer edge of the basin by approximately 40' since predevelopment. This drop does not necessarily imply that the Mt. Simon aquifer is being depleted, but rather it illustrates that this aquifer is vulnerable to overuse.

Figure 9

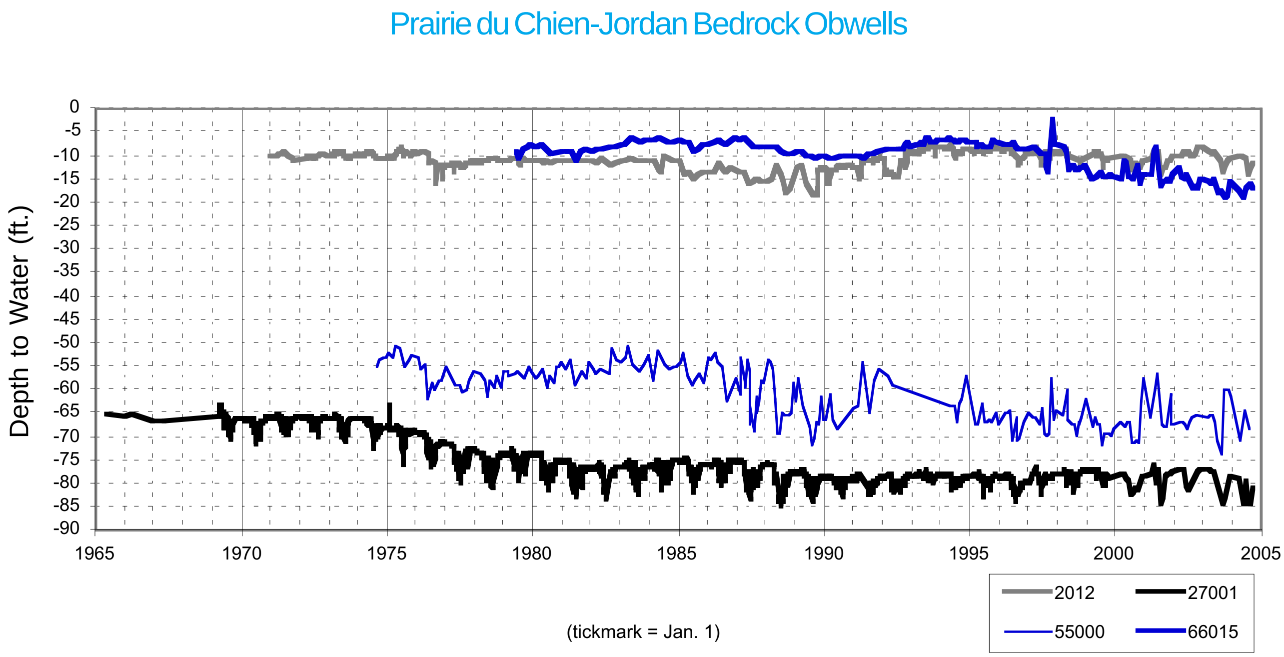
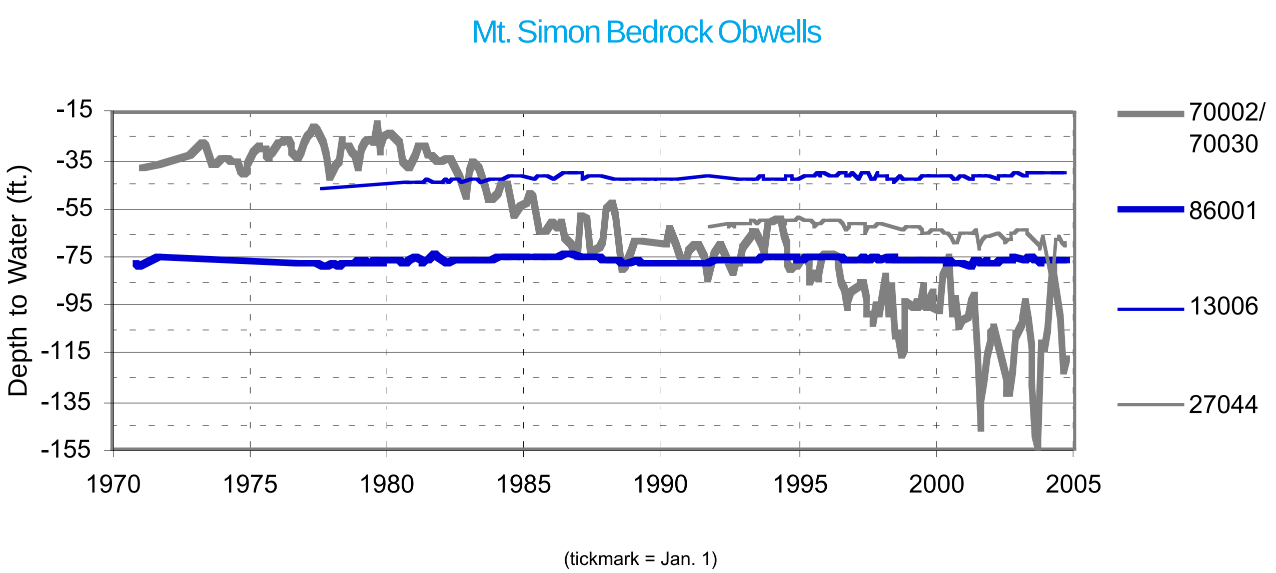


Figure 10



Network Improvement

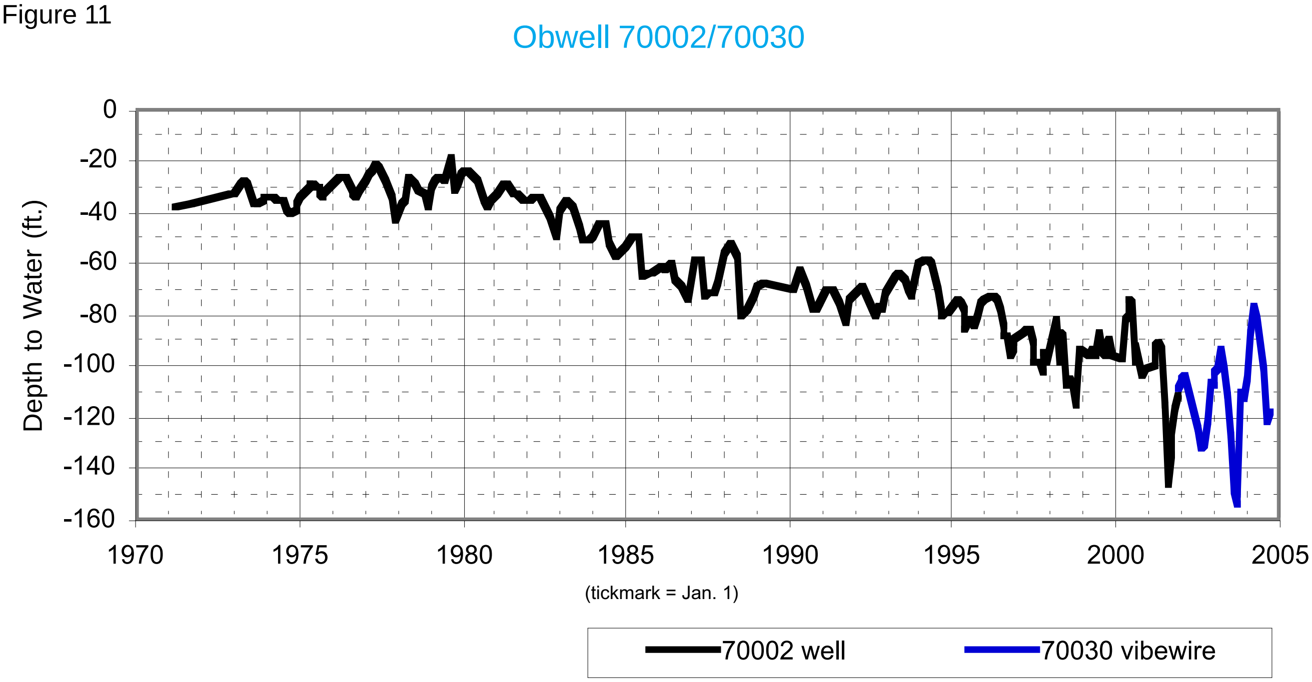
A systematic review of each obwell continues. During this review, each obwell will be visited by DNR hydrogeologists. When feasible, physical tests such as slug tests, gamma logging, and video logging will be performed on the obwell in order to confirm the quality and usefulness of the obwell within the network. Although approximately 750 obwells are actively monitored, the ground water level database contains some water levels for nearly twice that many wells that are not being monitered (inactive). The fate of the inactive wells will be determined so that appropriate management actions can occur. The review of each county or aquifer will include an analysis of the coverage and water levels, which could result in a change of monitoring frequency or obwell distribution. This review will take several years to complete.

DNR Waters' program of exploratory drilling and observation well installation continued on a limited basis. A few shallow obwells were replaced that were no longer functioning properly or that were lost due to a variety of circumstances such as inadvertent sealing, road construction, or well owners' decisions to eliminate the wells from their property.

The multi-aquifer monitoring point in southern Dakota County is now monitored in real-time using equipment provided and maintained by the US Geological Survey. Piezometers at this site are located in each aquifer and confining layer from the Shakopee Formation down into the Mt. Simon aquifer. This equipment will allow the data to be accessed though a webpage.

The vibrating wire piezometer, a technology used in civil engineering, has been adapted to monitor ground water levels. The piezometer is placed at the desired depth in a borehole or well and may be sealed in place. Measurements are taken at the ground surface using a computer and a data logger. This technique was first used by DNR Waters in WY99 to continue the record of a Mt. Simon aquifer obwell, which was sealed due to development. The technique has now been used at many locations throughout the state. For instance, Obwell 70002 had a long period of record in a significant aquifer. It was important to maintain that monitoring location if possible, however, the property owner needed to use the well location for another purpose. A vibrating wire piezometer was installed in the well as the well was sealed. The hydrograph of Obwell 70002/70030 shown in Figure 11 illustrates that this transition occurred seamlessly.

Figure 11



all ground water monitoring is not the same...

What is a ground water level observation well?

Ground water levels may be obtained from wells that are drilled for the exclusive purpose of measuring ground water levels. They are just as likely though to be obtained from other types of wells or piezometers, which are or were used for some other purpose. For instance, some ground water level observation wells (obwells) are large diameter municipal water supply or irrigation supply wells. Others are or were smaller diameter domestic supply wells. And yet other wells were installed as part of an aquifer study or a ground water quality study of an area of specific interest. Instead of drilling new wells, existing wells are incorporated into the ground water level network whenever possible if the existing well meets the specifications for well construction and if the existing well is in a location where ground water levels are needed.

Minnesota Statutes and Rules contain the well code that the Minnesota Department of Health uses to determine the type of well construction needed for a particular well use. For at least the last eleven years, wells for the ground water level network were installed by DNR Waters to higher construction standards than the well code requires so that these wells may also be used by other agencies for water quality monitoring (water withdrawn).

Why isn't all ground water monitoring for both water quality and water levels completed at the same well at the same time?

Many differences in the location, construction, measurement technique and purpose exist between ground water quality monitoring wells and ground water level observation wells. A water level taken at a water quality monitoring well may not be useful for the study of ground water levels and the requirements for obtaining useable water quality samples are often not compatible with the needs for ground water level data. Why? There are several reasons...

• Location - Obwells are usually located away from points of pumping influence in order to monitor the general water level of the aquifers although obwells may also be placed near points of appropriation for compliance monitoring. Much water quality monitoring is done in relation to a point of contamination or at a statistically based location for background water quality monitoring (that is wells to be sampled are selected on a location grid regardless of the aquifer). If an obwell happens to match the statistical location, that obwell may be used for water quality sampling. Most often though, the location where ground water level data is needed is seldom where water quality data is wanted. DNR Waters avoids using contaminated wells for ground water level measurement in order to avoid health risks.

• Quality control - Although DNR Waters assembles ground water level data collected by many sources, obwell data collected by the SWCDs is separated from water level data collected by others because we cannot be certain of the measurement method used by others. Water quality sampling is even more exacting. Persons taking water quality samples must be trained in the quality control methods that are applicable and must be trained about the health risks associated with contaminated water.

• Well constuction -

Materials: Water quality is affected by well construction. PVC, which is used for most new obwells, cannot be monitored for some chemicals because of interference from the PVC or the glue used. On the other hand, steel may be inappropriate for other water quality parameters.

Diameter: Many shallower obwells are 2" or less in diameter. It can be difficult to obtain water quality samples from many such small diameter wells. The deeper obwells that DNR Waters drills are usually constructed of 4" steel. Because DNR Waters' ground water level wells are constructed to a higher standard than is required, other agencies may use these wells for water quality monitoring; however, those wells may not be at a location where water quality monitoring is needed.

Screen: The screen of ground water level wells is usually placed as deep into an aquifer as feasible in order to always have a water level if the ground water level of the aquifer drops. However, for some water quality monitoring, such as for nitrates, the screen is set right at the existing water level in order to detect the substance of interest as it reaches the water table.

• Frequency and trip saving - Water level readings are generally taken once per month and sometimes more frequently. Water quality samples are collected much less frequently, perhaps once or twice per year. Fifteen to twenty or more water levels can be taken in one day depending on distance between the wells. The number of wells from which water quality samples can be taken in a day is considerably lower, so several days would be needed in order to visit each well for both purposes.

Local, state and federal water management agencies are aware of and have access to the location of the obwells. The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency is reviewing obwell locations for their newest monitoring program. The Minnesota Department of Agriculture and the Minnesota Department of Health have used obwells for other monitoring studies and the Minnesota Geological Survey has recently been using obwells for their Prairie du Chien fracture flow study. Ground water level wells are also used for water quality sampling by DNR Waters' hydrogeologists to determine the geochemical properties of the ground water for use in mapping aquifers and ground water flow patterns.

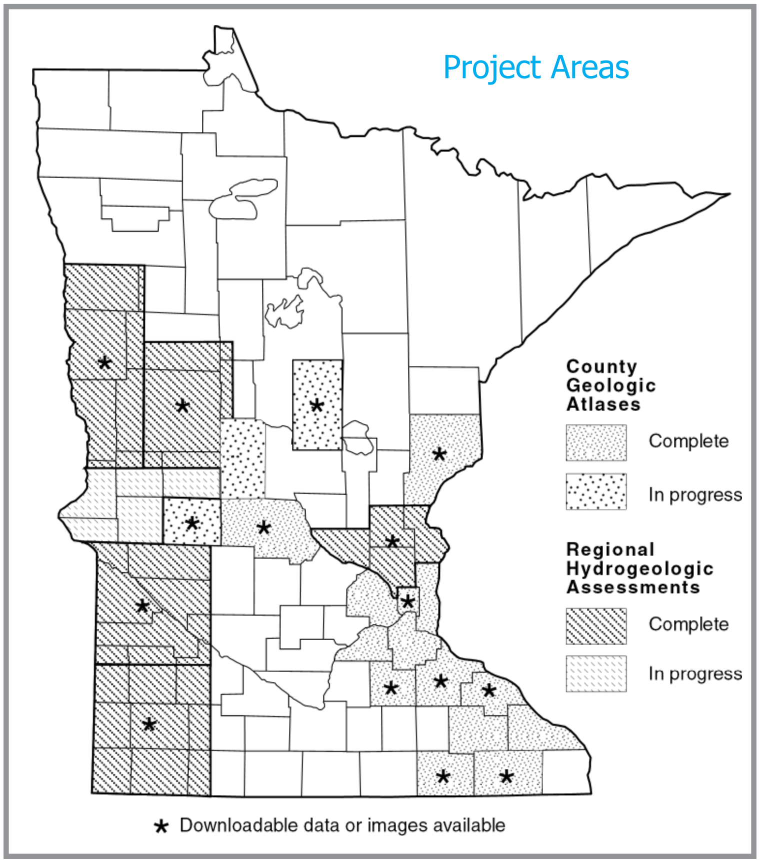
County Geologic Atlas and Regional Hydrogeologic Assessment Program

Ground Water Data

DNR Waters and the Minnesota Geological Survey (MGS) collaborate preparing the maps and reports of the County Geologic Atlases and Regional Hydrogeologic Assessments. The geologic data collection, mapping, and interpretation of the rock and sediment beneath the earth's surface by the MGS provide the framework for ground water studies by DNR Waters of how water moves through those materials and interacts with water at the land's surface.

DNR Waters project staff measure water levels in wells and collect water samples for chemical and isotopic analysis. Project staff also use ground water level monitoring data, climatology records, water use permits, and geophysical study reports.

Atlases and assessments are used in planning, environmental protection, and education. A better understanding of the physical environment and ground water systems enables better environmental decision-making.



Data Available Online

Digital data for many Atlas and Assessment projects, including geographical information systems (GIS) and related resource data, can be downloaded over the internet. Some map plate images and documents are also available as portable document format (PDF) files. GIS files have detailed data descriptions (metadata) available.

Digital data for many projects can be downloaded for use in GIS programs such as ArcView, ArcGIS, and EPPL7. Map viewers (at no or low cost) such as ArcExplorer can also be used to visualize the downloaded data. Some project digital data is not downloadable but is available on request.

Project data can be accessed on the DNR Waters website at **http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/waters/**
Links to MGS project data on their ftp site are also on the DNR Waters website.
For more information on MGS project data see the MGS website at **http://www.geo.umn.edu/mgs/**.