

Evaluation of injection well efficacy to address saltwater intrusion in water supply wells at Hooper Bay, Alaska

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1. Abstract

Saltwater intrusion affects water quality in coastal water supply wells, increasing salinity in drinking water and thereby negatively impacting communities. Hooper Bay, AK is a community in west Alaska that has experienced relatively high salinity water in their water supply wells. Injection wells are evaluated here in an effort to provide a possible solution to further saltwater intrusion in Hooper Bay wells. Analytical modeling is utilized to perform the investigation. Steady-State 2D horizontal models provide potential placement, spacing, and pumping rates for the proposed injection wells.

2. Introduction

2.1. Hooper Bay Hydrogeologic Setting

To avoid confusion between Hooper Bay the city and the water body, the city will be referred to as Hooper Bay, and the water body will be referred to as Hooper Bay (bay).

The town of Hooper Bay, AK is located in coastal western Alaska. See Figure 1 for a location map. Hooper Bay has historically experienced water quality issues related to saltwater intrusion in its water supply wells. Water quality data was not available to this study due to its remote location.

The hydrogeology of Hooper Bay is not well defined. The town is located overlying Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. Surficial sediments are predominantly composed of sand of varying grain sizes.

Permafrost is present in the subsurface overlying the screen interval of the water supply wells. Permafrost is considered to have very low permeability, and therefore aquifers underlying continuous permafrost are considered to be confined.

2.2. Saltwater Intrustion

Saltwater intrusion occurs in coastal areas where permeable formations exist. Freshwater (ρ = 1000 kg/m³) is less dense than seawater ($\rho \approx 1025 - 1035$ kg/m³), and therefore freshwater floats on seawater. Seawater is driven inland by its hydraulic head. Groundwater supplied by infiltrating precipitation, rivers, and other water bodies flows toward the sea. The result is a

wedge of saline groundwater that extends inland below the fresh groundwater some distance that depends on the aquifer characteristics and the flow of fresh groundwater (Bakker and Post, 2022).

In the absence of water supply well pumping, the saltwater wedge would extend inland some distance. See Figure 1 for a cross-section diagram of the situation. When the water supply wells are pumped, the wedge moves upward and inland toward the water supply wells due to the extraction of fresh water from the aquifer. See Figure 2 for a cross-section diagram. The proposed injection wells would push the saltwater wedge back toward the coast and down away from the screen of the water supply wells. See Figure 3 for a cross-section diagram.

2.3. Injection Wells

Injection wells are a method utilized to prevent saltwater intrusion to extraction wells (EPA, 1999). Injection wells are most commonly used to address saltwater intrusion in confined aquifers. The possible presence of continuous permafrost in Hooper Bay as a confining layer makes the prospect of applying injection wells to solve the issue of saltwater intrusion to water supply wells potentially feasible and promising.

3. Methods

3.1. Water Supply Well Drilling Logs

Drilling logs from the 2001 drilling of the water supply wells in Hooper Bay were reviewed to establish the site conceptual model. The logs include a limited amount of data and information on the aquifer sediments. The logs are provided in Appendix A.

3.2. Analytical Groundwater Models

Analytical groundwater models are developed to address the injection well system conceptual design. Analytical models are simpler than numerical models and require fewer input data. With the limited data available on the hydrogeology and water quality of Hooper Bay, the selection of analytical models is preferable due to the reduction of assumptions made in model construction.

The model selected for Hooper Bay is found in "Analytical Groundwater Modeling: Theory and Applications using Python" by Mark Bakker and Vincent Post. The model is adapted to reflect the hydrogeologic setting of Hooper Bay and the injection well system. The adaptations originate from the fundamental equations governing shallow confined interface flow as found in "Analytical Groundwater Mechanics" by Otto Strack.

A horizontal, steady-state, two-dimensional model is utilized to address the placement, spacing, and flowrate relative to extraction pumping for the proposed injection wells. The original model is found in "Analytical Groundwater Modeling: Theory and Applications using Python" as Section 7.5: A well in uniform background flow near the coast. The model constructs a flownet from the stream function and discharge potential within the aquifer. It also determines the discharge potential as a function of distance from the coast.

3.3. Model Assumptions

Several assumptions are made to simplify the problem and inform the models. The thickness of the aquifer is assumed to be near the bottom of the well boreholes. This has very little effect on the performance of the model or the conclusions drawn from it because if the aquifer is extended deeper, the saltwater does not change position at a given location.

The hydraulic conductivity is assumed to be 40 m/d, which is a common value used for sand (Fetter, 2001). The aquifer is assumed to be completely confined, which seems reasonable because the drilling logs indicate continuous permafrost. The uniform background flow toward the coast is assumed to be 0.5 m^2/d . This value was selected using parameter estimation based on model runs that provided a realistic saltwater wedge toe location in the absence of water supply well pumping (~400 m inland). The well nest was treated as a single well with a combined pumping rate as the wells are closely spaced relative to the distances to nearby seawater bodies.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Model Output Data Use Disclaimer

The analytical models used to evaluate the efficacy of injection wells at Hooper Bay are constructed with relatively sparse input data. For a final design of the system, further investigation would be necessary. Subsurface exploration would be required to determine the limits and continuity of the permafrost, the variability of the YK Delta sand, the depth to bedrock, and any other variations in the hydrogeology. Water quality data would be necessary to determine the actual position of the toe of the saltwater wedge and calibrate the model. Pump test data would be necessary to determine the hydraulic conductivity of the aquifer. The results of the model presented in this report should be considered rough estimates to guide further exploration, planning, and design.

4.2. Water Supply Well Critical Discharge

Pumping rates are evaluated for the five existing water supply wells and proposed injection wells in Hooper Bay. The 2020 census population of Hooper Bay was 1,375 (US Census Bureau, 2020). If the residents of Hooper Bay consumed water at the average rate in the United States,

 \sim 82 gallons per day (EPA, 2024), this would amount to roughly 78 gpm of demand in the community. Therefore roughly double that (150 gpm or 818 m^3/d) is likely a conservatively large estimate of pumping rate for the water supply wells.

The critical discharge for a well and a nearby water body is the discharge above which the well will capture water from that water body. The critical discharge to capture water from the Bering Sea is much greater (order of magnitude) than Hooper Bay (bay) as the distance between the wells and the coast is much greater. Therefore, the critical discharge related to Hooper Bay is considered the limiting discharge for the water supply wells.

At a pumping rate of 818 m³/d or 150 gpm, the effect of pumping on the discharge potential along the axis from the water supply wells to the Bering Sea is minute. At that distance, the effect of pumping is minor compared to the effect of the background groundwater flow regime. For this reason, the only axis considered is the line from the water supply wells and Hooper Bay (bay).

4.3. Injection Well Placement

The placement of the injection wells between the water supply wells and Hooper Bay (bay) is roughly estimated. The factors affecting the placement of the wells include the distance between the injection and water supply wells, the distance between the injection well and Hooper Bay (bay), and the injection pumping rate. If the well doublet is too close together, then injection water will rapidly flow to the water supply wells. In the event that injection water is pumped from the river, a short hydraulic residence time in the subsurface could lead to a loss of filtration efficacy and contaminant breakthrough. The injection well should also be far enough away from Hooper Bay to allow for tidal fluctuations and account for sea level rise.

Given a pumping rate of 818 m^3/d or 150 gpm or 30 gpm/well, the optimal placement of the injection well is determined to be roughly $x_i = 0.353x$ where x is the distance between Hooper Bay (bay) and the water supply wells. See Figure 7 for model results. This provides a minimum of 0.5 km between the water supply wells and the injection well. Additionally, the minimum buffer between the injection well and Hooper Bay (bay) is 0.35 km.

4.4. Injection Well Pumping Rate

At this water supply well pumping rate and injection well placement, the injection well is determined to have an optimal pumping rate of $Q_i = -2Q/5$, where Q is the water supply well nest pumping rate. At this rate, the saltwater wedge is pushed back towards the coast. While -Q/5 would provide this condition, -2Q/5 provides a safety factor that would allow for tides and storms without pushing water back toward the water supply wells.

4.5. Injection Well Spacing

The spacing of the injection wells is roughly estimated using the width of the well discharge zone in the model. The width of the discharge zone of the injection well where the axis to Hooper Bay is shortest (850 m) is about 300 m. Making adjustments for a radial arrangement of the wells and the slightly wider discharge zone (due to longer axes to Hooper Bay), it is estimated that four injection wells would be needed to sufficiently protect the water supply wells from Hooper Bay. Proposed locations are provided in Figure 8.

4.6. Saltwater Infiltration

Hooper Bay is subject to periodic storm surge from the Bering Sea and resulting saltwater inundation. Injection wells are utilized to protect the water supply wells from saltwater intrusion that occurs underground. Infiltration of seawater from above the land surface is a separate issue that injection wells are not adequate to address. Further investigation and analysis of storm surge events would be required to provide the relative influence of these events on the water quality in Hooper Bay.

5. Conclusion

The efficacy of injection wells for addressing saltwater intrusion at water supply wells in Hooper Bay, AK is evaluated above. Analytical models were used to determine the critical discharge of water supply wells and proposed injection well placement, pumping rate, and spacing. The model output data are informed by a limited amount of input data and should be considered rough estimates pending further investigation and analysis. A four injection well system is estimated to be sufficient to remediate saltwater intrusion from Hooper Bay (bay). Well placement is recommended at $x_i = 0.353x$ and injection pumping rate is recommended at $Q_i = -2Q/5$. Model results indicate saltwater intrusion from the Bering Sea is unlikely and injection wells are not proposed to the west of water supply wells.

6. References

- Bakker, M. and Post, V. 2022. Analytical Groundwater Modeling: Theory and Applications. CRC Press/Balkema
- EPA. 2024. WaterSense. Accessed 10/25/2024 at: https://www.epa.gov/watersense/statisticsand-facts
- Fetter, C. 2001. Applied Hydrogeology. Prentic Hall, Inc.
- Strack, O. 2017. Analytical Groundwater Mechanics. Cambridge University Press.
- US Census Beaureau. 2020. Hooper Bay, Alaska. Accessed 10/25/2024 at: https://data.census.gov/all?q=Hooper%20Bay%20city,%20Alaska

7. Figures

Figure 2 – Cross-section diagram of no water supply well pumping scenario along axis between the water supply wells and Hooper Bay (bay).

Figure 3 – Cross-section diagram of water supply well pumping scenario along axis between the water supply wells and Hooper Bay (bay).

Figure 4 – Cross-section diagram of injection pumping scenario along axis between the water supply wells and Hooper Bay (bay).

Figure 5 – Analytical Model Results for no water supply well pumping scenario. Compare to Figure 2.

Left: Flownet with equipotentials in blue, flowlines in orange, and location of saltwater wedge toe in black. Hooper Bay coastline at $x = 0$ m.

Right: Discharge potential along the axis from Hooper Bay to the water supply wells. Hooper Bay coastline at $x = 0$ m.

 $Q = 1200$ gpm, $x = 850$ m with no injection well.

Left: Flownet with equipotentials in blue, flowlines in orange, and location of saltwater wedge toe in black. Hooper Bay coastline at $x = 0$ m.

Right: Discharge potential along the axis from Hooper Bay to the water supply wells. Hooper Bay coastline at $x = 0$ m.

Figure 7 – Analytical Model Results for injection well scenario. Compare to Figure 4.

 $Q = 1200$ gpm, $Q_i = -2Q/5$, $x = 850$ m, $x_i = 0.353x$.

Left: Flownet with equipotentials in blue, flowlines in orange, and location of saltwater wedge toe in black. Hooper Bay coastline at $x = 0$ m.

Right: Discharge potential along the axis from Hooper Bay to the water supply wells. Hooper Bay coastline at $x = 0$ m.

Appendix A – Drilling Logs

STATE OF ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
DIVISION OF MINING, LAND & WATER
WATER WELL LOG

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STATE OF ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
DIVISION OF MINING, LAND & WATER
WATER WELL LOG

Drilling Started: 08 / 28 / 2001, Completed: 09 / 11 / 2001

STATE OF ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
DIVISION OF MINING, LAND & WATER
WATER WELL LOG

Drilling Started: 08 / 10 / 1999 Completed: 08 / 16 / 1999

STATE OF ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
DIVISION OF MINING, LAND & WATER
WATER WELL LOG

Drilling Started: 07 / 31 / 1999 Completed: 08 / 09 / 1999

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STATE OF ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
DIVISION OF MINING, LAND & WATER
WATER WELL LOG

Drilling Started: 09 / 12 / 2001 Completed: 10 / 02 / 2001

