



# Predicting Ground Water Flow

**NOTE:** Read this entire handout before beginning the activity.

## ► BACKGROUND

The water table is the surface of the saturated zone, below which all soil pores or rock fractures are filled with water. Ground water moves through the subsurface much like water on the ground surface, except that it travels a great deal more slowly. If the soil is mostly sand and gravel, ground water can move as much as five feet per day. But, more often than not, ground water moves at speeds of a few inches per day (or less).

Like streams and rivers, ground water moves from high areas to low areas. In this exercise, you will draw the contours of the water table to show how ground water moves beneath the ground, down the sides of a valley, to a river that flows to the sea. Before you begin this exercise, however, it is important that you understand three main principles.

First, ground water and surface water share a strong connection in New England. Have you ever noticed that streams continue to flow even when it hasn't rained for days? Where does the water come from? In most areas of New England, water is discharged to surface waters from ground water at the point where the water table intersects the surface of the land. In this situation, the surface water is called a **gaining stream** or **gaining pond**.

Second, because the water table is at the land surface adjacent to "gaining" surface waters, the elevation of ground water is generally the same as that of the river, especially between rain storms.

Third, ground water is assumed to flow at right angles to water table contours. This is because ground water moves downhill in the path of least resistance due to gravity. In this exercise, you'll use all three of these principles.

During this activity you will learn how to draw a water table contour map. Water table measurements that are taken at the same time of year can be used to develop a water table contour map to show the direction of ground water flow. Monitoring wells are typically used to determine the elevation of the water table. The elevation of the water table is determined at several locations throughout the area of interest. Like topographic map contours, water table contours represent lines of equal elevation. The difference between the maps is that water table elevations are measured in wells and at the river channel, not on the ground surface. Thus, just as surface water flow is downhill and perpendicular to topographic contours, the direction of ground water flow is also downhill and perpendicular to the water table contours.

Don't worry—drawing contours is easier than you think. Just follow these simple steps:

## ACTIVITY HANDOUT: PREDICTING GROUND WATER FLOW

### DIRECTIONS

#### ASSIGNMENT

1. Using the "Contouring the Water Table" worksheet, take a pencil (in case you make mistakes), and *lightly* draw in 3 or 4 arrows to show your prediction for the direction(s) of ground water flow.
2. Draw contours at 50-foot intervals. The pencil lines can always be inked-in later. Begin at 50 feet (the shoreline along the ocean will be sea level), then draw the other contours for 100, 150, 200, and 250 feet.
3. To get started, draw the 50-foot contour. Find the 50-foot elevation on the river. Draw a line from that point through the 50-foot elevation at the well just southwest of the river. Don't go much past the well, because there are no more data to tell you where to go!
4. Draw the contour on the other side of the river. When locating a contour between two points, you will have to **interpolate**—that is, figure out the proportional distance between the points. The 50-foot contour between the 30- and 80-foot elevations should be drawn closer to the 30-foot value (20 feet difference) than the 80-foot value (30 feet difference). You can do this by hand after a little practice, or measure it precisely with a ruler and calculator. For the other two wells, draw the contour exactly between the 30- and 70-foot elevations, because they are both 20 feet different from the 50-foot contour's value.
5. When you are finished, you will notice that the contours form V's with the river and its tributaries. That's because the river is a "gaining" river. It is receiving recharge from the aquifer. The contours show that ground water is moving down the sides of the valley and into the river channel. The opposite of a gaining stream is a "losing" stream. It arises when the water table at the stream channel is lower than the stream's elevation, or stage, and stream water flows downward through the channel to the water table. This is very common in dryer regions of the Southwest. In the case of a losing stream, the V will point downstream, instead of upstream.

**NOTE:** When making a water table map, it's important that your well and stream elevations are accurate. All elevations should be referenced to a standard datum, such as mean sea level. This means that all elevations are either above or below the standard datum (e.g., 50 feet above mean sea level datum). It's also very important to measure all of the water table elevations within a short period of time, such as one day, so that you have a "snapshot" of what's going on. Because the water table rises and falls over time, your map will be more accurate if readings are made before these changes occur.

Understanding how ground water flows is important when you want to know where to drill a well for a water supply, to estimate a well's recharge area, or to predict the direction contamination is likely to take once it reaches the water table. Water table contouring can help you do all these things!

ACTIVITY HANDOUT: PREDICTING GROUND WATER FLOW



▶ FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

1. Why are communities interested in learning the direction of ground water flow?

---

---

---

---

2. Why would it be important to know if a stream in your community is a “gaining” stream or “losing” stream?

---

---

---

---

3. Compare and contrast your predictions for ground water flow to your mapped ground water flow direction(s). Briefly explain and differences.

---

---

---

---



**KEY TERMS**

- Gaining Stream/Pond
- Interpolate
- Losing Stream/Pond



## Contouring the Water Table

