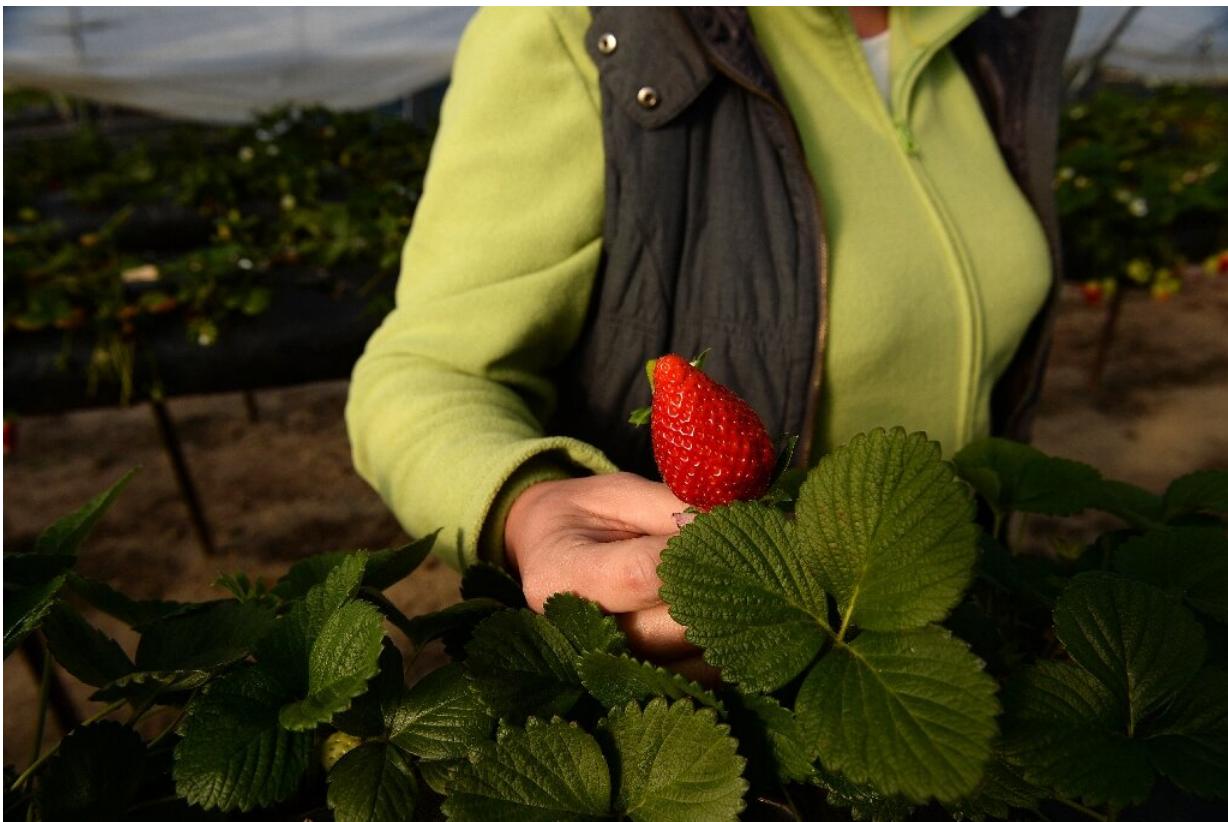


Water theft a growing concern in increasingly-dry Spain

March 20 2020, by Daniel Bosque



The digging of illegal wells to irrigate crops has been a widespread practice in Spain as water becomes increasingly scarce

Inside her greenhouse, Emilia Gomez bends down to see how her strawberries are faring following a difficult season with barely any water

after her farm's illegal well was shut down.

Digging an illegal well to irrigate crops is a widespread practice in Spain as [water](#) becomes increasingly scarce.

But around 100 such boreholes have been blocked off recently around Lucena del Puerto, a small town some 70 kilometres (45 miles) west of Seville in southern Spain, which has won notoriety for being the epicentre of groundwater theft.

"We've been growing fruit for 40 years and it's always been with water from the well. We've tried to legalise it many times but have always fallen at the last hurdle," says Gomez, 50, who manages the 20-hectare (50-acre) plot with her two sisters.

"And now they've shut down our wells without giving us another solution," she mutters, picking the strawberries that are normally on supermarket shelves across Europe within 48 hours.

Between the pine-covered hills of Lucena where a sea of white plastic greenhouses stretches many hundreds of acres, it's easy to find blocked-off wells and illegal irrigation ponds that just a few months ago were watering fields of strawberries, raspberries and blueberries.

In some cases, these boreholes are just metres away from Andalusia's Donana National Park, a protected natural reserve known for its wetlands which are fed by the same underground aquifers.



Around 100 illegal wells have been blocked off recently around Lucena del Puerto, west of Seville

Exposed by a tragedy

Such practices have been going on for decades but only came into the spotlight a year ago when a two-year-old boy fell down an illegal well near Malaga.

For two weeks, the country was on tenterhooks as rescuers staged a complex operation to find him, eventually recovering his tiny, lifeless body.

Illegal drilling "is becoming more and more common," says Ana Prieto,

spokeswoman for the police's environmental crimes unit, Seprona.

"Climate change, rising temperatures and the change from rain-fed to irrigated agriculture has all led to an overexploitation of important aquifers and to more illegal water extraction," she told AFP.

During a five-month nationwide operation last year, the unit discovered 1,400 wells and illegal boreholes, but there is little official data showing the extent of the problem.



In Spain, where two-thirds of the country is at risk of desertification, subterranean water reserves are crucial for surviving periods of scarcity

In 2006, the government estimated there were half a million illegal wells in use.

But in a recent study, Greenpeace estimated there were twice as many, calculating that the quantity of stolen water was equivalent to that used by 118 million people—two-and-a-half times the population of Spain.

A crucial resource

In Spain, where two-thirds of the country is at risk of desertification, subterranean water reserves are crucial for surviving periods of scarcity.

"If we don't take care of these reserves, we're going to get an unpleasant surprise when we really need them and find there's none left or that the water is contaminated," said Julio Barea, of Greenpeace Spain.

Overextraction can be particularly damaging for areas like the Tablas de Daimiel wetlands in central Spain or the crisis-hit Mar Menor saltwater lagoon in the southeast.



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During the summer, the Water Alliance of the Guadalquivir River, whose estuary crosses the Donana marshlands, toughened its stance, shutting down around 120 illegal wells.

"We will continue doing so because we mustn't kill the goose that lays

the golden eggs," said Alliance president Joaquin Paez, referring to crucial subterranean water resources.

The Guadalquivir basin "is very sensitive to [climate change](#)" with this year's water input "40 percent lower than the average for the past 25 years," he said.

In times of water scarcity, the subterranean reserves are "the main stores" that will allow farming to continue in an area where the sector employs some 80,000 people.



Huelva province produces 90 percent of red fruit crops in Spain, which is the world's top strawberry exporter

Strawberry fields forever?

Huelva province produces 90 percent of red fruit crops in Spain, which is the world's top strawberry exporter.

In 2015, Lucena del Puerto produced around 43 tonnes of fruit with a market value of some 500 million euros (\$540 million), says mayor Manuel Mora.

But with the crackdown on illegal wells, around half of these crops could be lost.

"If all these fields are put out of action, the town will hit the wall," he says.

They have been growing fruit here since the mid 20th century and although they have long been promised water from a neighbouring river basin, nothing has happened, prompting farmers to seek their own solutions.

Romualdo Macias, president of the area's irrigation association, says they would happily shut down the wells "but not before we have access to surface water".



In the hills of Lucena, it's easy to find blocked-off wells and illegal irrigation ponds that just a few months ago were watering fields of strawberries, raspberries and blueberries

Without her well, Emilia Gomez has switched to a hydroponic system which minimises [water use](#) and doesn't rely on soil. But even so, she knows her farm's future "is highly uncertain".

"If it doesn't rain this year, I will have to reduce my plot," she says.

'Pirate-like farmers'

Ecological associations say local authorities have spent years looking the other way.

"For a long time, it seemed like anyone could just take water and use the land with impunity," says Juanjo Carmona, World Wildlife Fund's coordinator for Donana National Park.

Donana has five subterranean reserves, but three now contain very little water while a fourth has reserves that are polluted, he says, blaming the area's "pirate-like farmers".

"In many parts of the aquifer, there is no water left," he added, suggesting the growth of irrigation was overstretaching the country's limited resources.



Last year, 1,400 wells and illegal boreholes were discovered but little official data exists showing the extent of the problem

"Instead of reducing the 'irrigation bubble', we keep inflating it with more and more hectares."

But in Lucena's main square, standing between the town hall and the white-and-ochre church facade, the mayor is adamant in his defence of the need for irrigation.

"Obviously, the crops are not what they used to be. But they can't ask us to go back to growing wheat and going hungry, as we did in the 1950s."

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