

Seawater intrusion barrier in the deltaic Llobregat aquifer (Barcelona, Spain): performance and pilot phase results

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ABSTRACT

The main aquifer of the Llobregat Delta (Barcelona, Spain) is affected by seawater intrusion processes since the 1960s. The Catalan Water Agency is currently promoting several actions of artificial aquifer recharge, including the construction of a positive hydraulic barrier in order to stop the advance of the seawater intrusion. Such a positive hydraulic barrier works by injecting reclaimed water in 14 wells. This is the first time that a project of this type is performed in Spain and it is also pioneer in Europe. The positive hydraulic barrier produces the rise of the groundwater head near the coast in order to halt seawater penetration inland. The injected reclaimed water comes from the WWTP of the Baix Llobregat after passing through several treatments (ultrafiltration, reverse osmosis and disinfection). The pilot phase of the project has been working during the last 3 years. Hydrogeochemical analyses show highly positive results and is effectively reducing the salt water intrusion process. Substantial improvement of the groundwater quality has been observed in wells surrounding the injection points and no clogging has appeared. Currently the whole planned project is under operation.

INTRODUCTION

The aquifers of the lower valley and delta of the Llobregat and the seawater intrusion

The geological make-up of the Llobregat delta has been well known since the middle of the 20th century and the subject of presentation of several SWIM meeting. There is a silt and clay wedge that separates two sand and gravel aquifers: an upper one with thicknesses of 15 meters below current surface, and another aquifer with thicknesses of 10 to 20 meters approximately, which is the main and most important aquifer. It is confined and very transmissive (1000 to 5000 m²/day).

The main aquifer of the Llobregat Delta is primarily used for urban and industrial supply, linked to the Lower valley aquifer that is a strategic resource for supplying Barcelona and its metropolitan area. Seawater intrusion processes have affected the main delta aquifer since the 1960s. The intensive exploitation over time of groundwater resources, along with the excavation of part of the confining layer, has led to the progressive deterioration of groundwater quality. Water abstraction counts currently for approximately 54 hm³/year, but it exceeded 100 hm³/year the 1970's. The sustainable value to avoid groundwater deterioration is around 40 hm³/year.

Artificial recharge actions in the Llobregat

To mitigate the water deficit, the Catalan Water Agency, along with government agencies operating in the same area, Agbar S.A. and the Users' Community, are carrying out various artificial recharge actions and an Extractions Distribution Plan. In the lower valley of the Llobregat, recharge ponds are being constructed in three areas, which will provide a total additional recharge of 6 to 10 hm³/year, and Agbar is traditionally performing scarification activities in the Llobregat river bed to enhance recharge, as well as direct recharge through injection wells.

METHODOLOGY

The Llobregat hydraulic barrier project

The most emblematic project to improve the quality of the aquifer is the construction of the positive hydraulic barrier using reclaimed water. The objective is to halt the advance of seawater intrusion. The barrier has been implemented in two phases (Figure 1). Phase one has been in operation since March 2007 with an injection flow of 2,400 m³/day in four injection wells. The second phase has a total injection flow of 15,000 m³/day to 11 injection wells operating since April 2010. There are 17 specific monitoring piezometers with remote-control data systems for water temperature, head and water electrical conductivity. The aquifer monitoring network also includes 13 wells and 7 existing piezometers, covering more than 30 km², in order to follow the impact of the barrier.

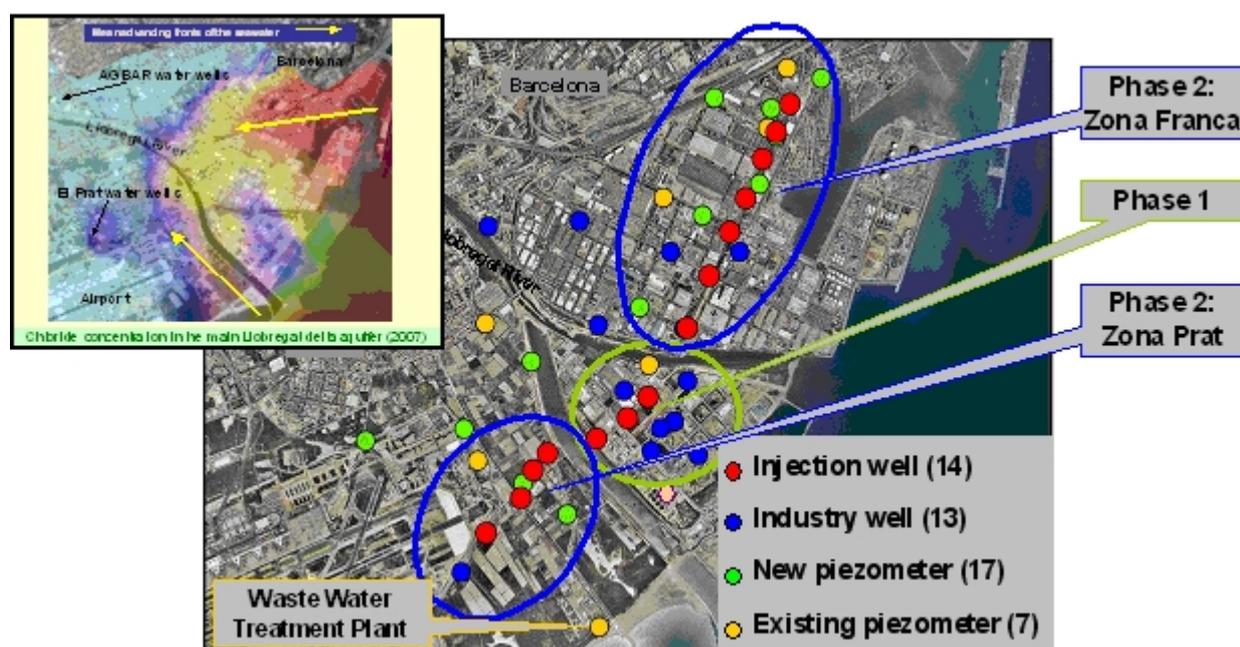


Figure 1: Chloride concentration in the main Llobregat delta aquifer (2007) and hydraulic barrier network configuration (injection wells and monitoring points). The project has been performed in two phases.

Injection water

The injection is reclaimed water from the El Prat Waste Water Treatment Plant, near Barcelona, and undergoes several treatments. Water is subjected to secondary and tertiary treatment, the latter consisting in ballasted coagulation-flocculation, lamellar decantation, filtration and disinfection. Tertiary treatment is used for environmental uses (Llobregat river flow increase and wetlands) and to feed the treatment plant of the hydraulic barrier. At the Hydraulic Barrier Plant, ultrafiltration, reverse osmosis (50% of the water) and UV disinfection are performed, prior to the distribution to the injection wells. The water quality control is carried out in compliance with the requirements of the Sanitation Authority.

Investment and exploitation costs

The total investment for the construction of the Llobregat hydraulic barrier amounts to €23M contributed by the Catalan Water Agency, the Spanish Ministry of the Environment and Rural and Marine Affairs, and the European Commission. The total cost of exploitation is €0.28/m³ of injected water.

RESULTS

Injected water

Injection of the phase one began on 26 March 2007, and since then around 1,400,000 m³ of reclaimed water have been injected in 4 injection wells. Some parameters (electrical conductivity, pH and temperature) of the injection water are logged automatically, and bacteriological and physicochemical parameters (BOD, COD, P, N, Cl, NO₃ and TOC) are monitored weekly. Monthly monitoring of major elements, metals, and volatile organohalogenated compounds is performed. The average chloride content of injected water is 347 mg/l, which is similar to that found in aquifers in areas that have not been affected by seawater intrusion. The electrical conductivity of the water is around 1500 mS/cm, and turbidity is less than 0.09 NTU. To date, the presence of coliforms, escherichia coli and nematodes has not been detected in any of the samples. Injection water accomplishes the Drinking Water Quality Regulation requirements.

Well clogging

No change has been noted in the specific flow (flow/head increase) of the four injection wells over the last three years of operation, which would imply that no clogging incidents have been detected. This is attributed in part to the high quality of the water, as reverse osmosis and ultrafiltration prevent physical clogging, and disinfection prevents bacteriological clogging, and in part to the strict cleaning program. The wells are cleaned through the use of electropumps or compressed air once a week.

Aquifer improvement

The analyses and field monitoring of the aquifer show a progressive decrease in the amount of chlorides (Figure 2), sodium, calcium, magnesium, iron and ammonium, and a slight increase in nitrates, which are present in the injected water. The barrier clearly has an oxidizing effect on the otherwise highly reducing medium; as a result, different hydrochemical and reactive-

transport studies are being carried out to determine if mobilization of metals or another processes taking place. Until now, sodium for calcium ion exchange has been identified, and the injected water is slightly oversaturated with respect calcite. These hydrochemical studies, as well as those carried out to identify clogging processes, are important factors to understand the behavior of the barrier and for a correct management for the complete barrier.

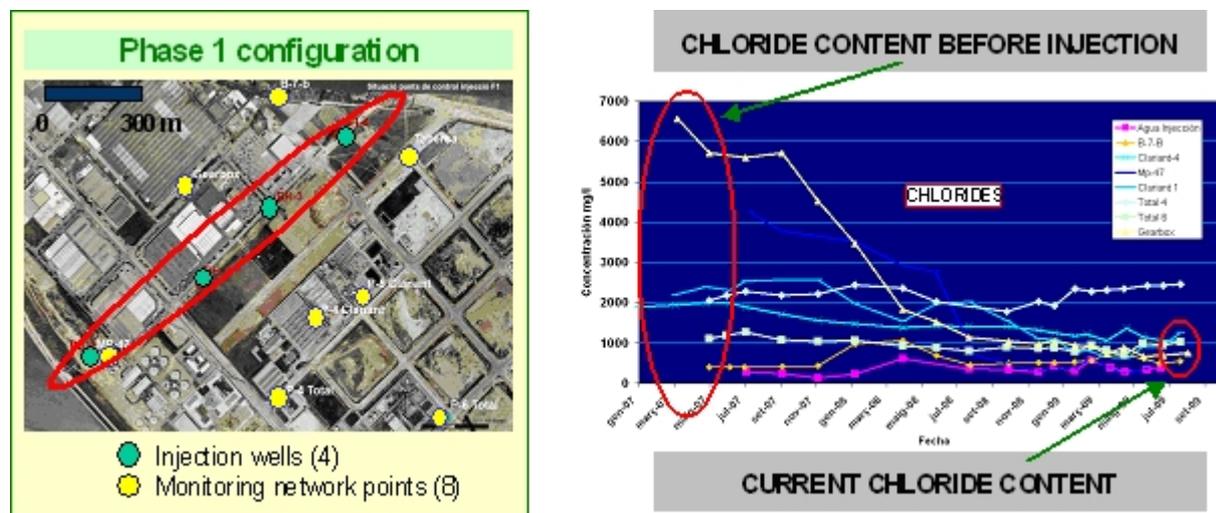


Figure 2: Pilot phase configuration of the hydraulic barrier project and chloride evolution in the monitoring control points between January 2007 and September 2009.
Water injection started March 2007.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

A positive hydraulic barrier injecting highly treated reclaimed water into the aquifer has been constructed in order to stop the advance of the seawater intrusion in the main Llobregat delta aquifer. The pilot phase of the project has been working during the last 3 years, showing highly positive results. No clogging has been appeared in the 4 injection wells, and it is attributed to the high water quality, with ultrafiltration, reverse osmosis and disinfection, and to the strict cleaning program. Substantial improvement of the groundwater quality has been also observed in wells surrounding the injection points. This shows that the concept and technology of the hydraulic barrier are able to contain the advance of the saline water fronts. Currently, hydrochemical studies and modelling are carried out to identify ion exchange, mixing processes or mobilization of metals in the aquifer. These hydrochemical studies, as well as those carried out to identify clogging processes, are important to understand the behavior of the barrier and implement the appropriate management. The results from the two-phase development of this project has been extremely positive in terms of learning from mistakes, calling the different teams, government agencies and business involved to action, thus achieving and improved a better guarantee of success for the future of the entire project.

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