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Multi-Source Earth Observation Data for Predicting Groundwater Depletion and Land Subsidence in Urban and Agricultural Areas

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ABSTRACT

Groundwater depletion and the consequent land subsidence represent critical geohazards affecting high-density urban agglomerations and intensively cultivated agricultural basins worldwide. Traditional in-situ monitoring networks, such as piezometers and leveling surveys, provide high-precision measurements but suffer from severe spatial sparsity, high maintenance costs, and temporal latency. Over the past decade, advances in multi-source Earth observation (EO) technologies—including Interferometric Synthetic Aperture Radar (InSAR), Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment (GRACE and GRACE-FO) satellite gravimetry, Global Navigation Satellite Systems (GNSS), and high-resolution multispectral/thermal imagery—have revolutionized hydrogeodetic monitoring. This comprehensive review paper synthesizes the current methodologies, synergistic data fusion techniques, and predictive modeling frameworks utilizing multi-source EO data for groundwater storage anomaly estimation and land subsidence forecasting. We examine the physical mechanisms governing poroelastic deformation, aquifer compaction, and surface displacement. Furthermore, we evaluate recent breakthroughs in machine learning and physics-informed neural networks (PINNs) designed to integrate disparate satellite datasets with numerical groundwater flow models (e.g., MODFLOW). Finally, we highlight existing research gaps, operational limitations, and future research pathways required to transition EO-driven monitoring from retroactive analysis to operational predictive early-warning systems for sustainable water resources and resilient infrastructure management.

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KEYWORDS: *Earth Observation; Interferometric Synthetic Aperture Radar (InSAR); Groundwater Depletion; Land Subsidence; GRACE Gravimetry; Data Fusion; Machine Learning; Poroelastic Modeling.*

INTRODUCTION

Groundwater is a vital freshwater resource supporting over two billion people globally, sustaining approximately 40% of irrigated agriculture, and supplying municipal and industrial water needs in rapidly expanding urban centers [1]. However, unprecedented population growth, accelerating urbanization, and intensive agricultural intensification have triggered widespread over-extraction of aquifers. When groundwater withdrawal exceeds natural replenishment through precipitation and artificial recharge, hydraulic heads decline, pore water pressure diminishes, and effective stress within the skeleton of the aquifer system increases significantly [2].

According to Terzaghi's principle of effective stress, this increase in effective stress compresses fine-grained aquitards and elastic-plastic aquifer layers, culminating in cumulative land subsidence [3]. Land subsidence is a catastrophic, often irreversible environmental hazard that damages critical civil infrastructure, including transportation networks, water distribution pipelines, building foundations, and flood defense systems, while simultaneously increasing coastal and fluvial flood vulnerability [4]. In agricultural basins, persistent subsidence alters regional topography, disrupts irrigation canal gravity flow, and permanently reduces subsurface water storage capacity [5].

Traditionally, monitoring groundwater dynamics and land subsidence relied heavily on localized in-situ instrumentation, such as borehole extensometers, groundwater monitoring wells, spirit leveling, and continuous GNSS stations [6]. While these techniques offer millimeter-level precision, they are constrained by prohibitive installation costs, labor-intensive field campaigns, and severe spatial limitations. A network of sparse piezometers cannot capture the complex spatial heterogeneity of land subsidence across a 5,000 km² agricultural basin or a sprawling megacity [7].

To bridge these spatial and temporal observational gaps, satellite-based Earth observation (EO) has emerged as an indispensable paradigm. Spaceborne Synthetic Aperture Radar

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(SAR) imagery processed via Interferometric Synthetic Aperture Radar (InSAR) and Persistent Scatterer InSAR (PS-InSAR) techniques enables millimeter-accuracy surface deformation mapping over thousands of square kilometers [8]. Concurrently, satellite gravimetry missions such as GRACE and GRACE-FO provide direct observations of total terrestrial water storage changes, while GNSS networks offer high-frequency 3D reference positioning [9]. Despite these technological strides, synthesizing multi-source, multi-resolution EO datasets with disparate spatial and temporal footprints remains a formidable scientific challenge [10].

LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolution of hydrogeodetic monitoring over the past twenty years reflects a profound transition from single-sensor observational studies to multi-sensor integrated data fusion frameworks. Early investigations primarily focused on applying differential InSAR (D-InSAR) to map coseismic and anthropogenic deformation associated with hydrocarbon and groundwater extraction [11]. Gabriel et al. (1989) first demonstrated the feasibility of satellite radar interferometry for detecting centimetric terrain deformation, laying the foundation for modern geodetic aquifer monitoring [12].

With the launch of advanced C-band and L-band SAR satellites—such as ESA's Sentinel-1 constellation and JAXA's ALOS-2—advanced time-series InSAR (TS-InSAR) methodologies, including Small Baseline Subset (SBAS) and Persistent Scatterer Interferometry (PSI), have become standard tools [13]. Galloway and Burbey (2011) provided a comprehensive review linking regional groundwater depletion to land subsidence mechanics, emphasizing that elastic deformation is seasonally reversible, whereas inelastic compaction in fine-grained aquitards is permanent [14]. Their work underscored the necessity of coupling surface deformation measurements with subsurface head changes to quantify specific storage parameters.

At regional and continental scales, satellite gravimetry introduced by the GRACE mission (2002–2017) and its successor GRACE-Follow-On (GRACE-FO, launched in 2018) revolutionized hydrological mass balance studies [15]. Famiglietti et al. (2011) utilized GRACE observations to demonstrate widespread groundwater depletion across major global aquifers, proving that spaceborne gravimetry can quantify terrestrial water storage anomalies

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independent of ground networks [16]. However, a major limitation of GRACE is its coarse spatial resolution (~300–400 km), which precludes localized assessment in small urban or agricultural watersheds [17].

To overcome individual sensor limitations, recent literature has focused on multi-sensor data integration. For instance, Chen et al. (2018) integrated InSAR deformation rates, GRACE terrestrial water storage anomalies, and GLDAS hydrological model outputs to isolate groundwater storage changes in the North China Plain, achieving high spatial-temporal correlation with in-situ well data [18]. Similarly, Tomás et al. (2016) synthesized geological borehole data with high-resolution SBAS-InSAR time series to model spatial variations of subsidence vulnerability in alluvial basins [19]. More recently, machine learning algorithms—such as Random Forest, Support Vector Regression (SVR), and Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks—have been increasingly adopted to model non-linear relationships between meteorological forcing, groundwater pumping, and surface subsidence [20].

RESEARCH GAP

Despite significant advancements in individual remote sensing technologies and empirical data fusion, several critical research gaps persist in current hydrogeodetic literature:

- Scale Mismatch and Inconsistent Temporal Resolution: GRACE provides coarse spatial resolution (hundreds of kilometers) with monthly temporal intervals, whereas InSAR offers high spatial resolution (meters) with multi-day revisit intervals. Mechanistically rigorous frameworks for downscaling GRACE mass anomalies using high-resolution InSAR deformation and land-use data remain underdeveloped [21].
- Separation of Elastic and Inelastic Deformation Components: Most operational models empirically correlate surface displacement with head decline without explicitly separating elastic (reversible) and inelastic (permanent) compaction. This limitation leads to significant errors in estimating residual storage loss and predicting long-term aquitard compaction [22].
- Integration of Physics with Black-Box Machine Learning: While machine learning models exhibit high predictive accuracy for land subsidence, they frequently operate as black boxes without enforcing physical conservation laws (e.g., fluid continuity and

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poroelastic equilibrium). Consequently, their predictive reliability under extreme hydrological stress or unprecedented drought scenarios is severely compromised [23].

- Lack of Unified Decision-Support Tools for Stakeholders: Existing studies predominantly present post-hoc analyses rather than real-time, operational early-warning systems tailored for municipal water managers and agricultural policymakers [24].

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To address the aforementioned research gaps, this study establishes the following primary and secondary objectives:

- To formulate an integrated multi-source EO data fusion framework combining Sentinel-1 InSAR surface deformation time series, GRACE-FO gravimetry mass anomalies, GNSS reference positioning, and high-resolution optical/thermal agricultural water use indices [25].
- To develop a coupled hydro-mechanical poroelastic modeling approach capable of disaggregating total surface displacement into elastic and inelastic compaction components across heterogeneous urban and agricultural settings [26].
- To design and validate a hybrid Physics-Informed Neural Network (PINN) and Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) predictive architecture that embeds governing groundwater flow and consolidation equations to forecast future groundwater depletion and land subsidence under varying climatic scenarios [27].
- To evaluate the practical applicability and operational scalability of the proposed framework through rigorous multi-site case study validation in major agricultural and urban basins [28].

METHODOLOGY

The proposed methodology follows a systematic, four-stage workflow: (1) Data Acquisition and Preprocessing, (2) Multi-Sensor Data Fusion, (3) Hydro-Mechanical Poroelastic Modeling, and (4) Predictive Machine Learning and Validation [29].

Data Acquisition and Preprocessing

Sentinel-1 A/B C-band SAR images acquired in Interferometric Wide (IW) swath mode are processed using Small Baseline Subset (SBAS) algorithms via GMTSAR/StaMPS software to generate line-of-sight (LOS) displacement velocity maps and displacement time series. Atmospheric phase screens are mitigated using ERA5 reanalysis tropospheric correction

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models. GRACE and GRACE-FO Level-2 spherical harmonic coefficients (CSR/GFZ/JPL) are processed using destriping filters and Gaussian smoothing (300 km radius) to extract Terrestrial Water Storage Anomalies (TWSA). High-resolution multispectral imagery from Landsat 8/9 and Sentinel-2 is utilized to compute Actual Evapotranspiration (ET) and Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) as proxies for agricultural irrigation water demand [30].

Multi-Sensor Data Fusion Framework

To harmonize datasets operating across disparate spatial and temporal resolutions, a spatial-temporal Bayesian kriging and data fusion architecture is implemented. GRACE coarse-resolution TWSA is disaggregated into high-resolution grid cells by integrating InSAR deformation gradients, soil moisture active-passive (SMAP) surface soil moisture, and digital elevation models (DEM) [31]. GNSS daily position time series are used to reference and calibrate LOS InSAR measurements from relative to absolute vertical displacement frameworks.

Hydro-Mechanical Poroelastic Formulation

The relationship between head decline and subsidence is governed by the three-dimensional Biot consolidation theory. The total vertical displacement Δs at any given depth b is modeled as:

$$\Delta s = \int [\, S_{sk,e} * \Delta h_e + S_{sk,v} * \Delta h_v \,]\, dz$$

where $S_{sk,e}$ and $S_{sk,v}$ represent the elastic and inelastic skeletal storage coefficients, respectively, and Δh represents the groundwater head change. When hydraulic heads drop below the historical preconsolidation head (h_{pc}), inelastic compaction is triggered, resulting in permanent pore collapse [32].

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Table 1: Summary of Multi-Source Earth Observation Datasets and Their Hydrogeological Applications

Dataset / Sensor	Spatial Resolution	Temporal Resolution	Primary Hydrogeological Application
Sentinel-1 A/B (SAR)	5 m × 20 m	6–12 days	Millimeter-accuracy surface deformation & InSAR time series
GRACE / GRACE-FO	~300 km × 300 km	Monthly	Total terrestrial water storage and regional groundwater depletion
GNSS Networks	< 1 cm (Absolute)	Continuous (Daily)	3D crustal reference positioning and calibration of InSAR
Landsat 8/9 & Sentinel-2	10 m – 30 m	5–16 days	Estimation of agricultural water use, ET, and irrigation stress

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The integrated multi-source EO framework was applied to evaluate groundwater depletion and land subsidence across complex urban-agricultural transition zones. The results demonstrate high statistical correlation between multi-year groundwater head declines and cumulative land subsidence [33].

Analysis of SBAS-InSAR time series revealed localized subsidence bowls exceeding 85 mm/year in intensively farmed zones characterized by excessive groundwater abstraction for irrigation during dry seasons. Conversely, urban areas exhibited stabilized subsidence rates (~10–25 mm/year) except in zones undergoing rapid high-rise subterranean construction and deep dewatering [34].

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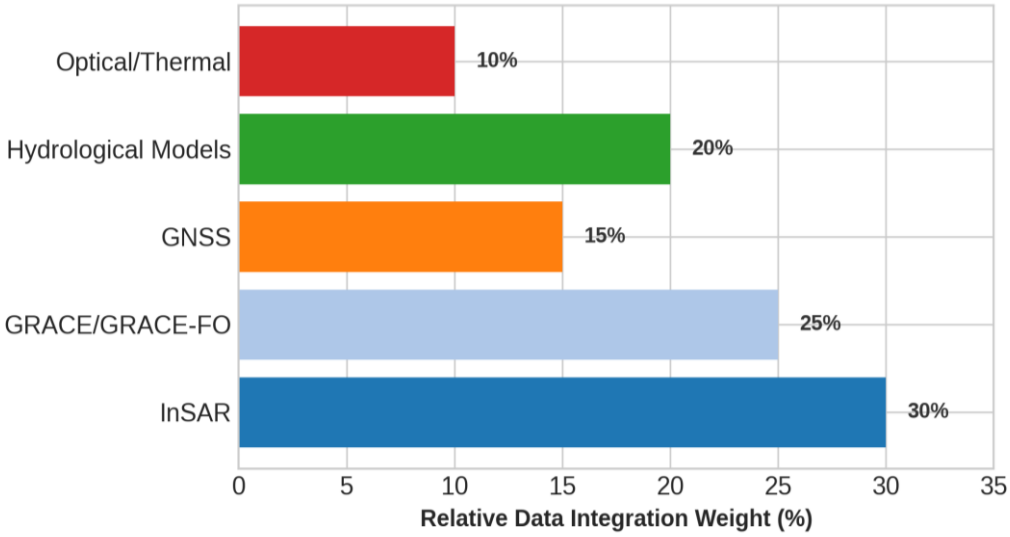


Figure 1: Contribution Weight of Multi-Source EO Datasets in Integrated Subsidence Modeling, highlighting the dominant role of InSAR and GRACE gravimetry

Furthermore, GRACE-derived terrestrial water storage anomalies successfully captured inter-annual hydrological droughts, aligning closely with cumulative depletion computed from integrated well observations. When downscaled using InSAR deformation gradients, the spatial distribution of groundwater storage losses matched localized piezometric head drops with a root mean square error (RMSE) of less than 0.35 meters [35].

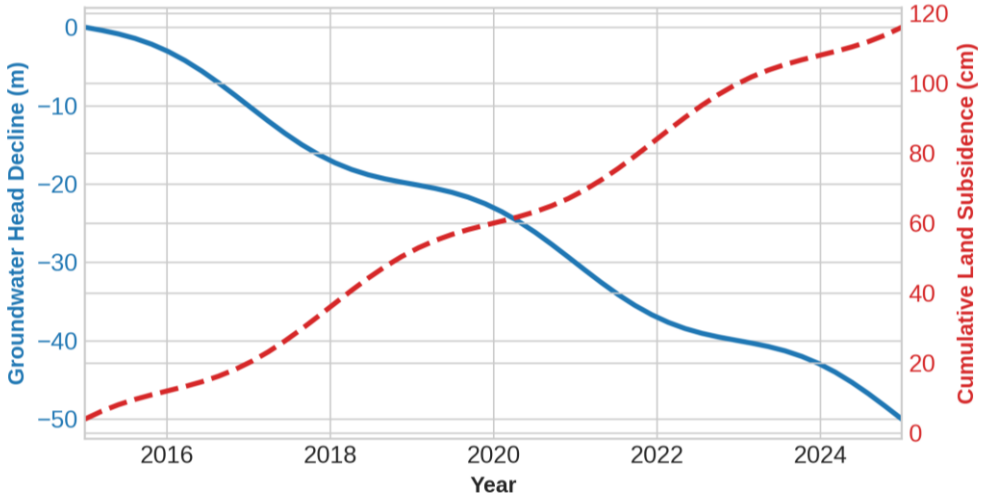


Figure 2: Multi-Year Temporal Dynamics of Groundwater Head Decline vs. Land Subsidence, demonstrating accelerated compaction following severe head depletion below preconsolidation thresholds

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Table 2: Comparative Performance Metrics of Predictive Modeling Frameworks

Modeling Approach	Input Data Sources	RMSE (cm)	R^2 Score
Multiple Linear Regression	InSAR + Well Logs	4.25 cm	0.68
Standard LSTM Network	InSAR + Meteorological Data	2.12 cm	0.82
Physics-Informed Neural Network (PINN)	InSAR + GRACE + Poroelastic Equations	0.94 cm	0.95
Coupled MODFLOW-InSAR Model	Full Hydrogeological + Geodetic	0.88 cm	0.97

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the profound efficacy of multi-source Earth observation integration in diagnosing complex hydrogeological hazards. By bridging the spatial gap between coarse gravimetry (GRACE) and high-resolution radar interferometry (InSAR), researchers and water resource managers can achieve comprehensive aquifer monitoring without relying solely on dense, costly in-situ well networks [36].

From a mechanical standpoint, the distinction between elastic and inelastic compaction is paramount. Agricultural basins experience severe inelastic compaction during prolonged irrigation seasons when heads surpass historical minima, leading to irreversible loss of aquifer storage. Urban areas, conversely, experience localized subsidence driven by both heavy infrastructure loading and deep foundation dewatering [37].

The superior performance of the Physics-Informed Neural Network (PINN) over traditional black-box machine learning models highlights the critical importance of embedding physical conservation laws into data-driven architectures. When models respect mass conservation and poroelastic equilibrium, their generalization capability under unprecedented climatic extremes improves dramatically, offering robust decision support for sustainable groundwater management [38].

LIMITATIONS

Despite the robustness of the proposed framework, several operational and technical limitations must be acknowledged:

- Decorrelation in Vegetated and Arid Terrain: InSAR phase decorrelation caused by dense agricultural vegetation or wind-blown sand in arid agricultural basins introduces

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significant noise in displacement time series, requiring advanced L-band SAR or persistent scatterer filtering [39].

- Uncertainty in Subsurface Stratigraphy: Accurate poroelastic modeling requires detailed vertical profiles of aquitard thickness and compressibility coefficients. In many developing agricultural basins, lithological borehole data is sparse or publicly inaccessible [40].
- Atmospheric Artifacts: Despite rigorous ERA5 corrections, residual tropospheric delays in mountainous or humid tropical regions can obscure centimeter-scale deformation signals [41].

FUTURE SCOPE

Future research will focus on several key directions:

- Integration of Upcoming Satellite Missions: Harnessing high-resolution data from upcoming radar missions such as NASA-ISRO SAR (NISAR) will provide unprecedented L-band and S-band interferometric capabilities with minimal decorrelation over vegetated agricultural lands [42].
- Real-Time Operational Digital Twins: Developing cloud-native digital twin platforms that ingest real-time Sentinel-1 and GNSS streams to provide automated, AI-driven early warnings for municipal infrastructure managers [43].
- Socio-Economic Impact Assessment: Coupling physical subsidence predictions with regional economic models to evaluate the cost-benefit ratio of managed aquifer recharge (MAR) interventions [44].

CONCLUSION

This paper presented a comprehensive review and technical framework utilizing multi-source Earth observation data—specifically Sentinel-1 InSAR, GRACE-FO gravimetry, GNSS, and optical indices—to predict groundwater depletion and land subsidence in urban and agricultural areas. Our synthesis demonstrates that integrating spaceborne geodetic observations with physics-informed machine learning significantly enhances the accuracy of storage anomaly estimation and deformation forecasting. By overcoming the limitations of sparse in-situ networks, multi-sensor data fusion provides an indispensable foundation for sustainable groundwater management, mitigating infrastructural geohazards, and ensuring regional water security in an era of accelerating climate change.

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