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NASA Data Lights Up Times Square to Advertise the Groundwater Crisis

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It's World Water Day, and thanks to 19,000 square feet of advertising, the hundreds of thousands of people who have passed through Times Square today should be aware of the decline in global groundwater levels that threatens millions.

The 19,000 square feet was spread out over two prominent billboards, which displayed data provided by NASA satellites about the levels of groundwater reserves around the world.

The 30 second display, mixed in among ads for "Mad Men" and Tide cleaning products, is the result of the inaugural HeadsUP! visual design competition, in collaboration with Visualizing.org. The winning entry, called "Visualizing Seasonal and Longterm Changes in Groundwater Levels," comes from Dutch designer Richard Vijgen.

The goal of the display is to send a message to the public about the urgency of the world water situation, which affects the United States as well as other parts of the world. Ad time was donated by Thompson-Reuters, which owns the two billboards.

The data displayed was gathered by NASA's Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment (GRACE) mission, begun in 2002. Scientists can study fluctuations in the planet's gravity fields to determine groundwater levels in various locations.