

San Antonio eyes supply of Gonzales groundwater

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San Antonio has been warned that a recent study shows there may be too little underground water in Gonzales County to supply its plans to export billions of gallons each year - but the Alamo City isn't just going to walk away.

The San Antonio Water System, the city's water utility, is raising the question of whether another groundwater study of Gonzales County, one which predicts more bountiful supplies, might not be used instead to determine water availability for its proposed water well field along state Highway 97 near the community of Bebe.

There is a third study - one now being conducted by SAWS itself - that San Antonio is asking to be brought into the mix, too.

Earlier this year, Gonzales County Underground Water Conservation District officials informed San Antonio that there is probably little or no unallocated groundwater left in their county for San Antonio.

They based their assertion on figures contained in the Texas Water Development Board's new groundwater availability model - or GAM - for the southern Carrizo aquifer, the underground reservoir that supplies water wells in Gonzales County.

But SAWS has asked regional water planners to take a look at another state-prepared GAM for Gonzales County: the central Carrizo aquifer GAM, which estimates that the Carrizo has four times more water flowing into it than the southern Carrizo GAM predicts.

The two GAMs are among several computer models developed by the Texas Water Development Board to help Texas water planners better estimate the amount of underground water available to meet the state's growing water needs.

The decision on which GAM to use will be made by water planners with the South Central Texas Regional Water Planning Group, which is responsible for developing plans to meet the water needs of the rapidly expanding population in their 21-county area stretching from Victoria to Uvalde.

"Their choice is fine with us," said Gary Guy, water resource engineer for SAWS. "We're really not directing anybody to use any one of the GAMS. We're not advocating one over the other."



A water well drill bit lies idle Friday after being used to bore a test well at the San Antonio Water System's proposed water well field in western Gonzales County. The testing will help determine whether enough underground water exists at the well field to supply San Antonio with as much as 9.8 billion gallons each year.

At last Tuesday's meeting of the south central Texas water planners in San Antonio, Gonzales water district manager Barry Miller encouraged the water planners to adopt the southern Carrizo GAM.

"We chose the southern GAM as fitting the needs of Gonzales County the best," Miller said.

But what if the planning group adopts the SAWS model, due out in the fall, or the central Carrizo GAM?

"At that point in time, we will be in conflict," said Miller.

If the planning group adopts a GAM other than the Gonzales water district's preferred southern Carrizo GAM, the Texas Water Development Board would likely have to step in and mediate.

SAWS' Communication Director John Boggess said calling the situation between San Antonio and Gonzales County "a fight" is going too far.

"I wouldn't call it a fight at all. That's not what the regional planning process is about," said Boggess. He said SAWS is simply trying to verify whether or not water exists for its planned well field.

But Gloria Rivera of Seguin, a member of the board of the South Central Texas Regional Water Planning Group, said she feels "it's clear" that SAWS is attempting to persuade planners to support its pumping plans in Gonzales County. "That's the purpose of these comparison (studies)," she said.

Rivera said she'll support adoption of the southern Carrizo GAM because it is supported by Gonzales County officials and because it "covers more of the region than the central GAM, which is really for another region. The southern GAM's conclusions are much more valid to our planning than the other one."

Rivera isn't exactly impartial.

She also serves on the board of the Schertz/Seguin Local Government Corporation, which operates a large water well field in western Gonzales County just 5 or so miles away from the proposed SAWS well field.

The Schertz/Seguin project was developed recently at a cost of \$51 million to provide water to those two cities.

Rivera worries that heavy pumping by San Antonio could deplete the aquifer in the area and cause problems not only with water wells that supply Gonzales County residents homes and ranches, but with the Schertz/Seguin wells as well.

San Antonio is hoping to take up to 30,000 acre-feet each year from Gonzales County. That's approximately 9.8 billion gallons.

"Can you imagine the nightmare that it would be to have SAWS nearby, with the resulting impact on the people around the Schertz/Seguin project?"

She said any problems arising with Gonzales County residents' water wells would probably result in both exporters having to split costs to get those wells up to snuff again.

"Our pockets are not deep as SAWS! I cannot get SAWS to understand the negative impact their operation is going to have on our operations," she said.

Rivera said the Schertz/Seguin philosophy is not to impact the aquifer at all. "We want to produce only enough water so there's no harm done. We do not want to dewater the aquifer nor impact it negatively in any way."

SAWS' Guy and Boggess said San Antonio won't pursue its well field if its site-specific study shows the water isn't there in amounts that can be safely harvested.

SAWS is just beginning to gather water availability data from test wells at the site.

"Based on the data that we develop out there and the evaluation of that data, if it shows there's really no available water, we really won't pursue it," Guy said. "But if it shows there is available water, we'll take that data to the regional planning group and to the underground water district and go from there."

San Antonio hopes to use its \$170 million Gonzales County Carrizo Aquifer Project along with other water development projects to bring new sources of water to a city long solely dependent on the over-allocated and federally protected supplies of the Edwards Aquifer.

Guy said while the Gonzales water is a supply San Antonio would like to see developed, the city also has other water projects in development it can fall back on.

"If tests should prove the water's not there, I think in the long run we'll still be OK."

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