

## **Victoria, area groundwater districts considering impact study**

December 3, 2003  
GREG BOWEN  
Victoria Advocate

GOLIAD - A fledgling multi-county alliance of groundwater districts in the Victoria area is considering commissioning a study that would look at the impact of projects like the Lower Guadalupe Water Supply Project on underground water reserves across the region.

Groundwater district officials from Goliad, Refugio, DeWitt, Bee, Karnes and Live Oak counties met Tuesday in Goliad to discuss the questions they'd like answered in the proposed \$50,000 study - and which districts might help fund it.

Sitting in on the meeting were officials from Victoria County, where county residents in 2001 voted down the creation of a groundwater district that would have been given the power to regulate the county's underground water supply.

Victoria County Judge Don Pozzi told the gathering that he's seen no groundswell of support in Victoria County for a groundwater district and he doubts whether county commissioners would commit funds to help pay for the budding alliance's proposed study.

But neither Pozzi nor Victoria County Commissioner John Hammack rejected the idea of Victoria County's participation in the multi-county alliance.

Hammack said information that would be learned from the proposed study could even help citizens of Victoria County decide whether to revisit the idea of forming a groundwater district.

The groundwater alliance's study would examine, among other things, the effects of extensive groundwater pumping in one county on the groundwater levels in neighboring counties.

"We all share the same Gulf Coast Aquifer water and so any project that comes into this area is going to have to be looked at on a multi-county basis," said Art Dohmann of the Goliad County Groundwater Conservation District, who proposed the idea of the multi-county study.

The question of a water project having impact across county lines arose this summer in regard to the Lower Guadalupe Water Supply Project, which would supplement San Antonio's water supply and includes large water-well fields in Refugio, Goliad and Victoria counties.

A study done for the Refugio County Groundwater Conservation District and unveiled in July concluded that Refugio County's underground water supplies are fed by groundwater

flowing from Goliad and Bee counties. Increasing the amount of water pumped in Refugio County would raise the amount of water being pulled from beneath the neighboring counties, the study said.

"What kind of impact is that going to have on Goliad, Bee, DeWitt, Karnes? We don't know that," said Larry Aduddell of the Refugio County Groundwater Conservation District. "That's what we need to find out."

Dohmann said the Refugio study helped the would-be members of the multi-county alliance decide a larger study was needed to examine impacts over an expanded geographical area.

"Aquifers don't recognize county lines," said Bob McCurdy of DeWitt County's Pecan Valley Groundwater Conservation District.

McCurdy said the new study should also help determine how much water can be safely exported without harming existing groundwater resources. "Once it's gone. It's gone. You can't put it back," he said.

The study - a multi-county groundwater availability model for the central Gulf Coast Aquifer - would be done by Professor Venkatesh Uddameri of Texas A&M Kingsville, who also did the Refugio County study.

The geographical boundaries of the new study were one thing debated Tuesday. There seemed to be general agreement that the study area would examine an area including all or parts of DeWitt, Karnes, Victoria, Goliad, Bee, Refugio, Live Oak and San Patricio counties.

It would also examine such things as groundwater recharge rates and how much water could be removed without lowering the level of the water table.

Uddameri said the study could be completed by next summer.

Several members of the would-be alliance said the groundwater districts will likely need the new study's results to support their actions in court - if they set groundwater pumping limits that are too restrictive for the liking of water developers.

"Most of the groundwater districts will tell you it's not if you're going to get sued, it's when," said groundwater district manager Lonnie Stewart of Bee County.

The study, they said, would also act as a "check and balance" for other groundwater availability models created by the state and by water-project developers that show the presence of larger amounts of available water than local groundwater district officials believe exist.

DeWitt's McCurdy said the amount of water available for export has been "exaggerated" in such studies.

"In order to keep local control over our groundwater resources, which we all want desperately, we need to make some local effort in order to develop the best available data instead of just taking what is served up to us by the state," said Bill Jones of Victoria, a board member with the South Central Texas Regional Water Planning Group.

Commissioner Hammack said he believed citizens appreciate a local study, one not affiliated with any river authority or state agency or water developer. "This might put their minds at ease and it might generate a few phone calls (in favor of a groundwater district in Victoria County)," Hammack said. "I think it would be good to get more information for the people to have to make a decision."

McCurdy said those in surrounding counties are concerned that Victoria's lack of a groundwater district could result in unlimited pumping that would deplete the regional aquifer. "It may be that the data that is generated will help convince some of the people in Victoria County" to support a groundwater district, he said.

Jones suggested that Victoria County - which has been identified as a site for a Lower Guadalupe Water Supply Project well field but doesn't have the benefit of a groundwater district to set pumping limits or to develop data on its aquifer - could get low-cost information on its groundwater resources by helping fund the multi-county study.

It seemed to be the consensus that the Refugio County groundwater district wouldn't be asked to help fund the new study since it has already committed \$60,000 to groundwater studies.

Groundwater officials agreed to discuss the funding question with their respective boards and return to Goliad for more talks on Jan. 13.

At the upcoming meeting, the groundwater district representatives will also continue to refine the parameters of their proposed study and will discuss the further development of the multi-county alliance.

"We laid some real good groundwork here today in terms of the alliance and our commitment to working together," said Dohmann.

Bee County's Stewart, who is credited with coming up with the idea for the alliance, said state water law calls for neighboring groundwater districts to join together in joint groundwater management areas.

"We're trying to come up with some way to effectively manage the whole area," said Stewart.

A draft cooperative agreement would officially form the alliance and name it the South Texas Regional Groundwater Alliance.

Tuesday's meeting was the second for the group.

The first meeting, to start the dialogue about forming a multi-county alliance, was held in Beeville in October.

"We're still trying to put it together in terms of the players," said Dohmann.

• **Greg Bowen is a reporter for the Advocate. Contact him at 361-580-6519 or by e-mail at [gbowen@vicad.com](mailto:gbowen@vicad.com).**