

Rift over Edwards flow study could end water project

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A rift between two of the partner agencies in the Lower Guadalupe Water Supply Project has one of them saying it just might have to rethink the idea of participating in the project that would export water from the Victoria area to San Antonio.

Tension between the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority and the San Antonio Water System centers on a SAWS move that GBRA believes could result in reduced flows from the Edwards Aquifer into the springs that feed the Guadalupe River, which provides Victoria's primary source of drinking water.

"Comal Springs and San Marcos Springs are the lifeblood of the Guadalupe River - and our first job is to protect the Guadalupe River," said Bill West, general manager of GBRA.

Problems began last month when San Antonio, long dependent on the Edwards Aquifer as its sole source of water, asked the U.S. government to update 11-year-old numbers that established the minimum amount of Edwards water required under federal mandate to flow into the Comal Springs at New Braunfels and the San Marcos Springs at San Marcos.

The minimum requirements - 100 cubic feet per second at San Marcos Springs and 200 cfs at Comal Springs - were set by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1993 to protect endangered species living in the largest springs in the southwest United States.

In a press release issued late Tuesday, GBRA stated: "The recent unilateral action by SAWS requesting U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to review and potentially decrease the current minimum spring flow requirements ... may well constitute a breach of the May 10, 2002, agreement for the LGWSP."

Under that agreement, SAWS, GBRA and the San Antonio River Authority became partners in the development of the massive water project, which was heralded not only as a much-needed new water supply for the Alamo City, but also as a project that would cut San Antonio's over-reliance on the aquifer and help ensure continued spring flow from the Edwards to the Guadalupe.

The LGWSP, estimated to cost \$683 million to \$785 million or more, would supplement San Antonio's water supply with Guadalupe River water taken near Tivoli - to which GBRA holds permitted rights - and underground water from Victoria, Refugio and Goliad counties.

"But if the underpinning is no longer there, if we don't have that (spring flow) protection, it puts us in the position of saying, 'Let's rethink this situation and our willingness to share,' " said GBRA's West. "The Lower Guadalupe Water Supply Project is predicated on the effective management of the Edwards Aquifer."

In its press release, GBRA stated it must now carefully reevaluate the both the spring flow situation and the water project.

"It is important that we receive assurances that the spring flows into the Guadalupe River will continue to be protected and that all of the sponsors of the LGWSP are committed to the fundamental purposes of the project," GBRA said.

The water project is now under pre-construction development. Construction is slated to begin in late 2007. The first water is targeted for delivery in 2012.

SAWS, in its July 13 letter to Fish and Wildlife asking for the spring flow review, said when the minimum flow requirements were established more than a decade ago, they were put in place "very quickly and with limited data."

SAWS urged Fish and Wildlife to use "current, accurate and sound science" to conduct "a rigorous technical review in the reexamination of the minimum spring flow requirements."

SAWS spokesman John Boggess said: "The projects in the state water plan are based upon the latest science and we want to be consistent with that."

The newer data doesn't necessarily suggest that minimum spring flow numbers would be lowered after a federal review, he said.

However, GBRA's West said he's not aware of any such reviews "where the end result was an increase" in minimum flow requirements.

In a July 27 letter to SAWS' interim president and CEO Leonard Young, West said GBRA found it alarming that SAWS should seek to reduce minimum spring flows, which he said should occur only very rarely, for very short periods of time, during the very end of a repeat of the worst drought on record, the drought of the mid-1950s.

West said GBRA believes that SAWS' request for a federal review of minimum spring flow requirements is yet another effort to reduce the amount of Edwards Aquifer water that flows from the springs.

West cited recent rules established by the San Antonio-headquartered Edwards Aquifer Authority that allow Edwards Aquifer water to be pumped in amounts exceeding state-mandated limits, along with lax measures for reducing Edwards pumping during droughts, as two other instances in which federal protections for minimum spring flows have been eroded.

Those actions, taken with a drop in minimum spring flow requirements, would make it virtually certain that spring flows, during any major drought, would cease or fall below levels necessary to protect endangered species, West said.

Those actions also have the effect of making water rights along the Guadalupe River "junior," or secondary, to the rights of Edwards Aquifer pumpers, he said.

GBRA, in its press release, said it must make sure the river's integrity is not harmed - "for the sake of the hundreds of thousands of people in the Guadalupe Basin who depend on the Guadalupe for their municipal, industrial and agricultural water supplies; their livelihood; their recreation; and to preserve the environment, wildlife and natural beauty of the river and the estuary and bays it feeds."

SAWS' Boggess said the group feels the water supply project partnership is still strong and that the situation concerning the spring flow review shouldn't affect the working relationship with GBRA.

"We're going to have some differences from time to time, but as far as we're concerned there's not some major problem here as far as our partnership in the Lower Guadalupe Water Supply Project goes," he said.

Boggess said SAWS isn't attempting to claim the Edwards water needed by endangered species and downstream users. It just doesn't make any sense that SAWS would be investing hundreds of millions of dollars in alternate water-supply sources if it were planning to just continue using the Edwards, he said.

In an Aug. 16 letter to West, SAWS' Young said his agency needs the best science available as it continues to make long-term decisions about diversifying its water supply options.

Young also said SAWS understands the importance of adequate spring flow to Guadalupe River interests.

"It is our hope that we will continue to work toward some balance that provides management and protection for these vital resources acceptable to both our organizations," wrote Young.

GBRA said it has been in conversations with SAWS and SARA and will be scheduling a meeting to address the situation.

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