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2005 goes down in S.A. history as ninth driest

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Despite a watery year worldwide that included a tsunami, a flood-destroyed New Orleans and a record number of tropical storms, 2005 was officially the ninth driest year in San Antonio's history.

The 16.56 inches of rain recorded at San Antonio International Airport barely would beat out 1999's 16.63 inches to log the ninth spot. The National Weather Service considers normal rainfall here as 32.44 inches a year.

Even so, the Edwards Aquifer — the region's primary source of drinking water — is winding up the year in relatively good shape at 679.2 feet above sea level. That's 10.4 feet above the monthly average level for December.

But the aquifer started the year high at 697.3 feet — filled by the 45.33 inches of rain that made 2004 the sixth wettest year since records have been kept, starting in 1871.

The aquifer rose in March to 699.8 feet, near its all-time measured high of 703.2 feet, and dropped to a low in July of 675.4 feet.

"We actually had pretty good rainfall the first three months, so if you think about just the past nine months, it's been exceptionally dry," said Robert Potts, general manager of the Edwards Aquifer Authority.

"I haven't seen any weather projections for the next several months, but based on what's happened the past six to nine months, I'm not very optimistic about rainfall," Potts said.

"What's been interesting is that since the end of June, with very little rainfall, the aquifer has shifted only a little. It's been within 3 feet of 678 feet."

Potts said that with a continued lack of normal rainfall, aquifer levels could begin to show stress in the spring.

Restrictions on water usage, primarily landscape sprinkling, begin under most local ordinances when the aquifer level drops to 650 feet. Water usage restrictions haven't been enacted since 2000, except for a single day in 2002 that preceded record flooding.

If the prospect of water usage cutbacks this summer isn't enough incentive to save water, there are a couple of other reasons to ease off the tap.

A 4.8 percent increase in the rates that SAWS charges for water and sewer usage will show up on bills measured from Jan. 1, and SAWS and other water utilities are measuring winter water usage to determine what each customer's sewer bill will be for the next year starting in the spring.

Karen Guz, SAWS conservation director, said customers have conserved well, but it's a constant struggle, especially during dry periods.

"We're optimistic, but we're also dusting off our critical period plans," she said. "The pumping is not as high as we might have expected if this were five years ago. We think pumping would have been much higher without the programs we have in place.

"If people are still doing outdoor irrigation, they should be cutting back drastically," Guz said. "That's because the temperatures are cooler and a lot of the plant life is dormant."

She suggested SAWS customers looking for an easy way to save some water should drop by one the utility's service centers to pick up new showerheads and aerators.

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