

# **Bruce Davidson: Region's water battle looms large**

San Antonio Express-News

December 10, 2006

Edwards Aquifer users are still living with mild drought restrictions despite the fact that the San Antonio index well is 14 feet above the trigger level.

The Stage I critical period pumping restrictions remain in place because the San Marcos Springs flow is below 110 cubic feet per second.

In addition to the San Antonio index well level, San Marcos and Comal springs flows are triggers for launching drought restrictions.

But the Edwards Aquifer Authority is launching a study next year to determine whether a different pool of the aquifer feeds the San Marcos Springs.

Earlier studies have indicated the springs are not directly tied to the pool that San Antonio uses.

"It's been kind of an ongoing realization," said Robert Potts, general manager of the EAA.

In the work plan for the study, the EAA staff wrote, "Withdrawal reductions in Bexar County immediately increase flow at Comal Springs but do not appear to have the same effect at San Marcos Springs."

Potts added that the study "hopefully will nail it down."

But downstream users of rivers that depend on spring flows aren't happy with the idea of designating another pool of the aquifer that would allow more pumping in San Antonio.

"We feel like that's a divide-and-conquer strategy," said Bill West, general manager of the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority.

The disagreement is likely to be a point of contention as regional planners work to reach an agreement on legislation needed to bring relief to Edwards Aquifer users.

EAA and San Antonio Water System officials likely will want to eliminate the San Marcos Springs flow as a trigger for critical period management actions, while downstream users will object. The EAA study will not be complete until next fall, but the legislative session will end in May.

The springs question is only one area of disagreement still looming as the 2007 legislative session rapidly approaches.

Next year's session is crucial because without changes in the law, pumping permits from the aquifer will drop to 400,000 acre-feet at the beginning of 2008.

Currently, the limit is 450,000 acre-feet, but the law also required the EAA to issue 549,000 acre-feet in permits based on historical usage.

San Antonio Water System and EAA officials say they are encouraged by a resolution passed by the Guadalupe Basin Coalition — endorsed by the GBRA board — that supports raising the pumping cap to 549,000 acre-feet during times of plenty with certain conditions.

San Antonio area officials interpret the resolution to also voice support of a 349,000 acre-foot limit during severe drought.

West, who believes the science shows a limit of 200,000 acre-feet is needed to protect spring flows during tough times, says the resolution actually supports a cooperative process involving all stakeholders to determine the pumping allowed during severe drought.

Potts said the idea of such a nonelected emergency task force is problematic.

And then there is the question of whether downstream users should pay the cost of any loss of pumping permits that is ruled to be a taking of property rights.

The region's water works deserve credit for attempting to work out their differences in advance of the legislative session.

But cutting this deal will not be easy.

"I think we're making progress," West said. "It may blow up tomorrow."

House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Robert Puente, D-San Antonio, and his colleagues are going to need the wisdom of Solomon and the political skill of Lyndon B. Johnson to avoid a train wreck.

The Edwards region is out of time. If the problems aren't worked out, the water battles of recent years will seem like a taffy pull compared to the nightmare that is headed our way.

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