

Sparks fly over water plans

Proposed legislation to increasing allowed pumping from aquifer pits San Antonio against residents.

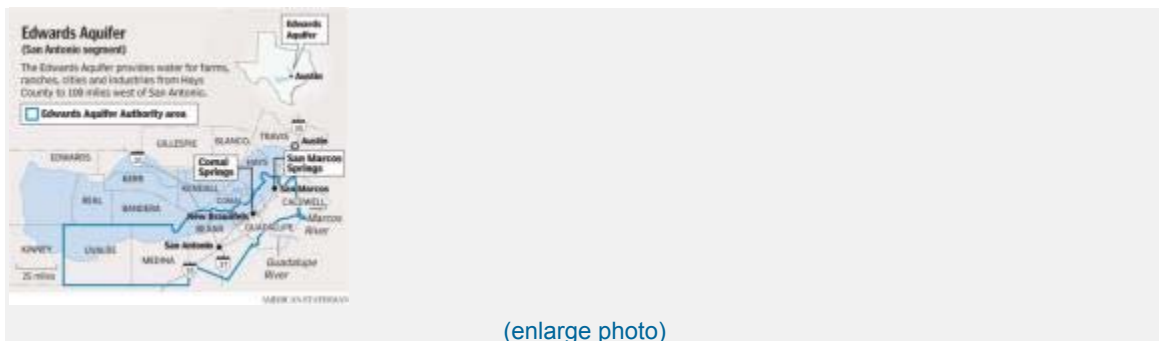
By Molly Bloom

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Monday, January 01, 2007

SAN MARCOS — A plan by state Sen. Jeff Wentworth to raise the Edwards Aquifer pumping limit is cause for concern among some constituents and cause for celebration among others.

Wentworth, whose district covers Comal, Guadalupe, Hays and Kendall counties and parts of Austin and San Antonio, plans to introduce a bill in the legislative session, which starts Jan. 9, to raise the Edwards Aquifer pumping limit from 450,000 acre-feet to 549,000 acre-feet and eliminate a scheduled reduction in the pumping limit to 400,000 acre-feet.



[\(enlarge photo\)](#)

Wentworth's plans make his San Antonio constituents happy but concern ones in Hays, Comal and Guadalupe counties. Local officials fear that if San Antonio doesn't do more to reduce its reliance on the aquifer during droughts, the springs that feed the Comal, Guadalupe and San Marcos rivers may run dry.

Wentworth said that the higher limit on pumping wouldn't overtax the aquifer or the springs during wet years and that any new legislation would include lower limits during droughts. When asked whether San Antonio should do more to wean itself from the aquifer, he said the question was "controversial" and "not productive."

"I don't answer that question anymore," he said.

Silent springs would be disastrous for endangered species and for towns dependent on tourism dollars. They would also be disastrous for the hundreds of thousands of people who rely on the Guadalupe River for their drinking water, said Michael Meek, president of the Greater New Braunfels Chamber of Commerce.

"It's not people versus fish," he said. "This is a people-versus-people issue."

Under state law, the Edwards Aquifer Authority is supposed to reduce pumping of the aquifer, the primary source of water for much of South Central Texas, from the present cap of 450,000 acre-feet to 400,000 acre-feet by 2008. But because of a conflict in state law, the authority issued pumping permits for 549,000 acre-feet a year. An acre-foot is the amount of water needed to cover 1 acre with 1 foot of water and is equal to about 325,850 gallons.

State Rep. Patrick Rose, D-Dripping Springs, who represents Hays, Caldwell and Blanco counties, opposes efforts to raise the pumping cap without drought restrictions. The companion legislation to Wentworth's measure would likely be carried by Rep. Robert Puente, D-San Antonio, who chairs the Natural Resources Committee.

San Marcos, New Braunfels and other cities have invested millions of dollars in pipelines and other projects to reduce their reliance on their segment of the aquifer, a 5,450-square-mile underground reservoir stretching from Kinney County to Hays County.

San Marcos now gets about 30 percent of its water from the aquifer, said city Water and Wastewater Department Director Tom Taggart. New Braunfels gets 10 to 20 percent of its water from the aquifer, Meek said.

The San Antonio Water System has spent about \$500 million to reduce its reliance on the aquifer — opening its first surface water facility in April, installing a water reuse system for industrial and irrigation uses in 2001 and pursuing several surface water sources — but it still gets most of its water from the aquifer.

By 2050, the San Antonio Water System expects to get 71 percent of its water from the aquifer if the system doesn't expand and about 50 percent of its water from the aquifer if it expands to serve regional communities as a wholesale water provider, according to the system's 2005 water system plan update.

Calvin Finch, director of water resources for the San Antonio Water System, said San Antonio has the lowest per-capita water use of any Texas city and the largest water recycling program in Texas, and it plans to spend about \$2 billion in the coming years on capital costs for projects to diversify the city's water sources.

"We're not standing still," Finch said.

The Guadalupe Basin Coalition — a group of chambers of commerce, cities and water supply corporations located along the Guadalupe River — has proposed an alternative to the legislative bickering and stalemate. A coalition plan supported by the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority and the San Antonio Water System would regulate pumping and protect endangered species.

In return for participating in the planning process, Guadalupe Basin Coalition members would not oppose raising the pumping cap during nondrought periods. On Jan. 17, cities, river authorities and other interested groups will meet with U.S. Fish and Wildlife staffers in New Braunfels to begin creating the plan, which could take two to seven years, Finch said.

"The fact that all of us are supporting it indicates that we're all ready to do some compromising," he said. "We probably should have done this a long time ago."

Wentworth — who said the San Antonio Water System and San Antonio River and Edwards Aquifer authorities asked him to raise the pumping cap — is meeting with stakeholders to reach a legislative consensus. The Edwards Aquifer Authority asked for the increased pumping cap because it thinks more water can be pumped from the aquifer in nondrought years without depleting it, said Doug Miller, chairman of the board of directors. But that limit would need to be scaled back during droughts, he said.

One of the main points of contention is the trigger for lowering the pumping limit in a drought, said Miller, who represents Comal and Guadalupe counties. The Edwards Aquifer Authority, whose board includes seven Bexar County directors among its 15 voting members, is recommending that trigger point be set by aquifer levels. The Guadalupe Basin Coalition would like to see those triggers tied to spring flows.

"Somewhere between Point A and Point Z, there's going to be a compromise," Miller said. "That's the way laws are made."

San Marcos Mayor Susan Narvaiz said that she hopes to meet with Wentworth in January to help make those laws but that the pumping limit shouldn't be raised until all the cities involved take the steps San Marcos has to reduce aquifer reliance.

"I think it's great to get everyone around the table, but at the end of the day, every citizen needs to give equally to the solution," she said.