

## **Carlos Guerra: Latest aquifer pumping skirmish could lead to a major water war**

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Watch out. The water wars are about to kick off again.

As the harried development around San Antonio continues, growth issues are becoming increasingly complex and difficult to resolve. And how we resolve them will be felt far beyond our city.

This is especially true with a legislative proposal to raise pumping limits on the Edwards Aquifer a whopping 22 percent, from 450,000 acre-feet to 549,000 acre-feet.

Most who pump aquifer water are cheering the measure. But others who don't but who rely on the aquifer-fed springs that eventually become rivers that supply surface water for municipal water systems, irrigation and recreation and keep coastal estuaries and bays healthy are understandably worried about the bill.

San Antonio was born and grew into a huge city because it sits atop the Edwards. And for more than two centuries, as it was tapped for irrigation, industry and residential use, it was thought to be all but infinite. But it isn't.

Still, it wasn't until the Sierra Club sued, charging that diminished flows from aquifer-fed springs were endangering unique animal species that controls on pumping were even considered.

After federal courts ordered the various species protected, the Legislature created the Edwards Aquifer Authority in 1993, empowering it to limit pumping.

"That legislation, while not perfect, did have important provisions, including the setting of the cap on pumping at 450,000 (acre-feet) and eventually ratcheting down to 400,000," says Ken Kramer, state director of the Sierra Club.

"The idea was to have, during normal rainfall times, a reasonable amount of pumping from the aquifer, and during droughts, the ability to ratchet it down to meet the drought situation and maintain aquifer and spring-flow levels."

In time, three gauges were established to trigger restrictions. In addition to water levels at the J-17 well, the EAA also monitors Comal and San Marcos spring flows.

But the 1993 legislation also included a provision that contradicts the pumping cap by guaranteeing pumpers the right to take as much water as they ever had in the past.

So, despite setting an overall pumping cap at 450,000 acre-feet which will decrease to 400,000 in 2008 the EAA was also ordered to grant what turned out to be 549,000 acre-feet worth of permits.

Now, the San Antonio Water System is leading farmers, other water systems, private water purveyors and other pumpers in asking the Legislature to reset the pumping cap at 549,000 acre-feet.

"We have a lot of concerns about it," Kramer says, because it could undermine the entire notion of managing the aquifer prudently.

And it isn't only the communities in eight counties that pump Edwards water that could be affected by higher pumping limits.

For businesses and other downstream interests that rely on spring flows of Edwards water, diminished or interrupted spring flows could be devastating.

And there are other things to consider, Kramer says.

"If you set the cap too high, you're going to increase the number of times you are going to be put into critical management periods, even in relatively short-term droughts because you won't have the sustained levels of the aquifer and spring flows."

Most of all, it is important to consider that relaxed pumping restrictions are likely to lead to consumption also rising to higher levels. And if we become addicted to these higher levels of water consumption, dealing with necessary restrictions is going to become much more difficult.

But could there be more to this proposal than meets the eye? And will there be consequences that no one has yet mentioned? Stay tuned for the rest of this complex tale.