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Water woes flow downhill - to us

Those 165 gallons of water you average using every day could become more expensive and difficult to treat, if legislators vote to lift a cap that regulates the amount of yearly water pumped from an aquifer north of here.

That's a warning from Jim Allison, the Austin-based attorney for the Victoria County Groundwater Conservation District, which met Friday.

Allison discussed State Sen. Jeff Wentworth - who, as The Associated Press reported, plans to introduce a bill this legislative session to allow more pumping from the Edwards Aquifer, an underground water source that has a direct impact on the amount of water flowing in the Guadalupe River.

Victoria relies heavily on the river for water.

And just days ago, "Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott issued an opinion that the plan the Edwards Aquifer Authority created to limit that pumping is not legally authorized," according to a report in the San Antonio Express-News.

That the Texas Legislature must now address whether a cap limiting water pumped from the aquifer should be sustained is "bad news and bad news" for Victoria County, Allison said.

Allison explained that if the aquifer's cap is lifted, then it would negatively impact the Guadalupe River by reducing water flow here.

But even if that cap isn't lifted, San Antonio wouldn't get the additional water it needs to sustain its growth, and the city will be forced to "accelerate looking for groundwater resources here."

Bob Keith, Victoria County's representative on the South Central Texas Water Advisory Committee, said the opinion the attorney general gave will likely change the opinions of the legislators to vote on the aquifer cap.

Lifting the aquifer's cap, except during drought times, is "prejudicial to downstream" water users, such as Victoria, Keith said. "We, downstream, will either be benefactors (of legislation regarding the aquifer), or victims of bad management."

Keith needed only to point to this past summer, where high temperatures and sparse rains decreased the flow of the Guadalupe River and forced the city of Victoria to resort to off-river sources to feed its people and industry.

"Water is water, and if you don't have surface water, you trade off for groundwater," he said.

And that's where your wallet may be impacted, Allison said. The attorney explained that it can be more costly for the city of Victoria to pump water from groundwater sources - as opposed to surface water, or rivers - because of the process used to treat it.

Victoria taxpayers would foot the bill for an increase in water treatment costs, Allison suggested.

"The quality of the water could be impacted, too," he said, adding that it's more difficult to filter groundwater. "Anytime the river level changes so do the impacts on the economy and environment of this area."

WHAT NOW? Garrett Engelking, general manager for the county's groundwater district, will be in Austin to review potential legislation and to lobby for local water interests, sharing an apartment with managers whose districts also reside downstream of this controversial aquifer.

Keith said he hopes that because the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality shares his opinion, and that of the South Central Texas Water Advisory Committee, that it lends credibility to wishes for a sustained aquifer cap.

But Allison, the attorney, believes, "We'll see a real push by San Antonio to amend the act and allow" further pumping from the aquifer. "Springs flows and endangered species downriver will inevitably be impacted. San Antonio can't sustain its present rate of growth with its present water reserves."

It's been long known that San Antonio, and even other water groups, have eyed the Gulf Coast Aquifer - today the ample underground water source beneath, in part, Victoria County - for water to supply growth.

If the Guadalupe River dips, Victoria and other cities will resort to pumping from the Gulf Coast Aquifer. This threatens the long-term availability of this water source by overusing it.

This debate on the aquifer, as heated as it's become, may have chilling effects.

"It's a snowball running downhill, maybe a mud ball or maybe even a rock," Allison said. "But either way, it looks like we're in the path."

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