

## RUNNING DRY

# Will Texas be without a drop to drink?

ART CHAPMAN  
In My Opinion



COURTESY OF TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT

Comanche Springs, shown in 1948, once gushed water.

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The city of Big Spring was founded at the edge of the Caprock escarpment in West Texas near a flowing spring that served the wildlife, American Indians and early settlers of the region.

The spring gave the city its name and its purpose. Now, that spring is artificially fed by pumps that circulate the same water over and over again. The spring is dry.

At Comanche Springs, near Fort Stockton, water once rushed from the ground at 1,900 liters a second. An early visitor describing the springs said the water came from the earth "like a sea monster." Comanche Springs is also dry.

Those depleted springs, and many more facing the same end, are the subject of a Texas Parks and Wildlife Department documentary, *Texas The State of Springs*, airing Thursday at 8 p.m. on KERA/Channel 13. The one-hour program is part of a continuing survey of the state's water needs.

Texas Parks and Wildlife, through video documentaries and its magazine, has already produced commentary on the state's bays and estuaries, and its lakes and rivers.

Thursday's documentary tackles the complicated issue of groundwater. With falling water tables and continued population growth, there is an inevitable conflict between supply and demand. Some say it is a simple matter of pumping surplus water from sparsely populated regions like the Panhandle to the growing population centers; but others say there is no such thing as surplus water.

*State of Springs* is narrated by Walter Cronkite, and it is filmed with detail and clarity.

"If we don't do a good job of managing our springs, then we're not doing a good job of managing Texas," says Joe Fitzsimons, chairman of the Parks and Wildlife Commission. Its executive director, Robert Cook, adds: "Water is the most important conservation issue in Texas."

But as the hourlong program progresses, it becomes clear that there is no single solution to saving our water. Comal Springs in the San Marcos area, Barton Springs in Austin, and San Felipe Springs in Del Rio are the state's largest springs, and they are all endangered.

Texas operates on "the rule of capture," the documentary explains. That means that when a landowner drills a well on his property, he can do what he wants with the water as long as it is not wasted. Some landowners believe they can sell their water to the highest bidder in the same way they might sell oil or gas that is pumped from their property. Others insist that the water is communal property that should be regulated.

The issue has set neighbor against neighbor with no end to the squabble in sight.

The documentary looks at a water district in Kinney County. Its meetings are contentious, with one member suggesting that the only answer is to storm the statehouse in Austin and demand change in the rule of capture.

The documentary essentially proposes that Texans do a better job of conservation. Cook says all water comes from rain, and we aren't going to get any more rain. We have to manage what we get more efficiently.

An Austin couple show how they have managed the landscaping around their home to make a huge difference in their water usage. Hill Country ranchers clear cedars from their rocky soil and allow grasses to grow. The grass holds the rainfall and allows it to seep into the soil rather than run off.

Among the more heralded forms of conservation are land purchases and conservation easements. Agencies, both private and public, pool their resources to buy large tracts to serve as watersheds that help recharge major aquifers. They also buy easements on ranches, paying the landowner to keep property intact and stem development that could further stress the state's water needs.

"The land will heal itself," the documentary concludes. "If we put it back the way it should be."