

Severe drought would stop Comal Springs

Spring feeding Guadalupe River could be dry for more than two years

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A historic drought on the magnitude of the one in the 1950s, when Texas was parched for seven years, would dry up Comal Springs in New Braunfels for 25 to 30 months even with water-saving standards contemplated in pending legislation, a new study shows.

"That would be a disaster," said Sen. Glenn Hegar, R-Katy. "That spring flow is vital."

Hegar represents a large swath of Southeast Texas that depends on the Guadalupe River fed by the springs. During last summer's drought, Comal and San Marcos springs accounted for 87 percent of the water as far downriver as Victoria, according to officials with the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority.

The new computer model, created by the Texas Water Development Board, will add to the debate among Texas lawmakers as they square off over whether to increase or reduce pumping from the Edwards Aquifer where the springs are located.

The study said San Marcos Springs seems less sensitive to different pumping levels because it gets water from two watersheds, but it doesn't contribute nearly as much water to the Guadalupe River as Comal Springs does.

Without a compromise, the Legislature must decide whether to side with thirsty San Antonio and increase annual pumping limits from 450,000 acre-feet to 549,000 acre-feet, or with surrounding communities, such as San Marcos, that favor reducing the limits to 400,000 acre-feet.

On one side are lawmakers such as Rep. Patrick Rose, D-Dripping Springs. He ordered the new computer model to bolster his argument for tighter limits.

"We need more science in this discussion," Rose said.

On the other side is Robert Puente, D-San Antonio, who leads the House Natural Resources Committee that hears all water-related legislation.

He has filed legislation increasing pumping limits to 549,000 acre-feet except in cases of severe drought, when limits would drop to 340,000 acre-feet.

An acre-foot is the amount of water needed to cover an acre with a foot of water and is equal to about 325,850 gallons.

Puente said that water experts suggested the lower level as adequate for a severe drought but that Wednesday's computer model raises questions about that number.

"If we hit a 1950s drought, it's devastating," Puente said. "Everyone has to participate in the agony."

He said San Antonio is looking for alternative sources of water, including the Lower Colorado River Authority that serves Central Texas.

Hegar said the cities, farms and industries served by the Guadalupe River would be devastated if the springs did not flow for more than two years.

"Everybody can share some pain and have backup reserves," he said. "They won't last 30 months."

He and Sen. Jeff Wentworth, R-San Antonio, are working on a compromise that would put things on hold for two years while federal, state and local officials create a response to the problem.

The senators still have differences.

Wentworth's bill would increase pumping limits to the higher level favored by San Antonio. Hegar would keep the limits at 450,000 acre-feet during the study.

Hegar said he is concerned about who would make the critical decision when to initiate water restrictions because of a drought.

"How do we guarantee we're going to have stream flows in a severe drought?" Hegar asked.

Wentworth said that a crucial fact gets lost in the debate: Last year, only 388,000 acre-feet were pumped from the aquifer.

"We are talking about the use of water that has never been used," Wentworth said.

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