

If Comal dries, Victoria is 'in trouble'

State water board releases report on drought effects

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BY GABE SEMENZA - VICTORIA ADVOCATE

If a drought similar to the intense Texas scorcher of the 1950s hits the state today, the consequences for Victoria "are devastating," a state water spokeswoman said Friday.

This is a projection, a best guess by state water experts who tested three scenarios involving pumping limits from the Edwards Aquifer and including water-saving standards contemplated in pending legislation.

The report's findings were released this week - at a time when Texas lawmakers debate about whether to increase the amount of water pumped yearly from the Edwards Aquifer, which affects Comal Springs. Comal Springs, in turn, plays heavily into the health of the Guadalupe River. If a drought of that magnitude hits Texas, it's estimated the springs could go dry and remain that way for more than two years.

During last summer's drought, Comal springs accounted for 87 percent of the water flowing through the Guadalupe as it passes Victoria, said LaMarriol Smith, a spokeswoman for the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority.

"If the Guadalupe isn't spring-fed by Comal, you're in trouble," Smith said. "I would guess that, at any time of the year, Comal springs supply 50 percent of the river as it flows here. If we had a drought (like the 1950s drought) it would be devastating environmentally and economically."

Economics are one consideration in the debate about how much water should be allowed out of the Edwards Aquifer. In an e-mail Friday, Todd Votteler, Ph.D., said Senator Glenn Hegar has filed a bill that would create a stakeholder process to determine what level of pumping is sustainable.

"San Antonio legislators have filed bills increasing the limit on pumping from 400,000 acre-feet per year in 2008 to 549,000," said Votteler, executive manager of governmental relations and policy with GBRA. "The Edwards Aquifer Authority decided to raise the pumping limit to 549,000 temporarily until the legislature does so as well."

Hegar's legislation - Senate Bill 1341 - is geared at finding consensus among stakeholders to ensure that the flow of the Comal and San Marcos springs are protected during droughts, while encouraging conservation and the development of new water supplies to meet the increasing demands of the region's growing population.

GBRA has publicly announced its support of that bill.

Smith said that the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality was expected to release a study with similar findings either Friday or Monday. It studied the effects that drought and the amount pumped out of the Edwards Aquifer would have on surface water.

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