

70 Edwards aquifer stakeholders meet

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In the waning moments of the tumultuous 80th Texas legislative session, lawmakers passed an omnibus water bill with vast implications for the 1.7 million people in South Central Texas who depend on the Edwards Aquifer.

Senate Bill 3 was amended 118 times before both chambers signed off on a compromised committee substitute version that is still awaiting Gov. Rick Perry's signature.

The reason for much of the debate: San Antonio lawmakers say pumping more water from the Edwards aquifer is needed to serve constituents along the Guadalupe River.

The result: language was added into SB 3 that would give the Edwards Aquifer Authority the go-ahead to increase pumping nearly 25 percent, from its current cap of 450,000 acre-feet per year to 572,000 acre-feet per year.

On Thursday, about 70 aquifer stakeholders met in San Marcos to start a dialogue process intended to eventually bring a consensus on the best science for managing water levels of the aquifer.

The group — comprised of about 50 different water entities with a stake in the aquifer — is part of the recovery implementation plan, led by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service anchored at Texas A&M University. The RIP group is tasked with finding a science-based solution that protects the aquifers springflows and endangered aquatic species in light of increased pumping.

Thursday's meeting was the first for the group since the measure was passed. The same group of aquifer stakeholders has been holding meetings since the legislative session began in January to discuss drafted water bills working their way through the legislature.

Now, the group is faced with finding ways to implement the complicated measure that has state wide water implications.

"Most of the discussion has been to figure out how to roll in what the legislature has established without disenfranchising a number of people," said Todd Voettler, executive manager of intergovernmental relations and policy for the Guadalupe Blanco River Authority.

The group is now faced with meeting a number of deadlines imposed by the legislature to ensure the RIP process flows as intended.

"If we don't figure this out in this room, those guys with their names on the legislation will move forward without us," said Jenny Sanders, conservation program coordinator for the Texas Wildlife Association.

Among the group's assignments: they must appoint a steering committee in place by the end of September. Then, the steering committee must find a program director by the end of October, a move some say will be vital to the final outcome of the RIP process.

"That could be a major determinant of the outcome of this process in some people's eyes," Voettler said. "For that reason there are folks not on the steering committee who would like to be on it, so they would have a say in that selection."

Representation also is a major point of contention for the group. The legislation dictates that

the 21-member steering committee must be appointed by state agencies, individual municipalities and the Edwards Aquifer Authority.

As of Thursday it was still not clear whether New Braunfels would have direct representation on the committee. Language from the legislation indicates that a "retail public utility whose service area includes the Comal or San Marcos springs," will be on the committee but it did not specify if that meant New Braunfels Utilities or the city of San Marcos utility services.

At the meeting, Robert Biggers, executive director of water services for New Braunfels Utilities, sat across from Tom Taggart, director of water and wastewater for the city of San Marcos. But the two still "haven't gotten together and talked about it enough to make a decision," Biggers said.

During conversation about stakeholders being excluded from the process, Kirk Patterson, president of Regional Clean Air and Water Association, raised questions about the lack of representation for domestic water users on the proposed steering committee.

"The people who pay the water bills are not represented at all," said Kirk Patterson, president of Regional Clean Air and Water Association, "Those who pay the bills and need the water for their homes as retail customers and domestic users need to be represented."

After the committee is formed, it will have the ability to expand beyond the initial 21 members suggested by the legislature and also have the power to create sub-committees.

"It's going to take more dialogue for everyone to come to a comfort level. Right now everyone is jockeying for position and no one wants to be left out," Biggers said. "It's not going to be an overnight process."