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Post Oak approves Alcoa, Blue Water agreements

By Curtis Chubb, Special to The Herald

Two major groundwater-use epicenters now exist in Milam and Burleson Counties.

One of the groundwater-use epicenters is located six miles west of Caldwell.

This epicenter encompasses five square miles and is framed by FM 908 and County Roads 319, 320, 376, 112.

Although this five square-mile parcel of land only represents 0.3 percent of the total area of Milam and Burleson Counties, the eight water wells located there will be allowed to pump 50 percent of the 60,000 acre-feet of available groundwater from the Deep Simsboro aquifer. The wells will extend more than 2,000 feet below the Earth's surface.

Last week, the owner of the wells, Blue Water Systems LP of Austin, received the approval of the Post Oak Savannah Groundwater Conservation District (Post Oak) to relocate three of their wells to the epicenter. The reason for the request was to congregate the eight wells near the beginning of a proposed pipeline that will transport groundwater to Travis County.

Each well will be capable of pumping 12 acre-feet (4 million gallons) of groundwater per day. Together, the eight wells are permitted to produce 31,000 acre-feet of groundwater (10 billion gallons) per year. Only one of the eight wells has actually been drilled.

Blue Water Systems is able to pump this much groundwater because it controls the groundwater leases of at least 75,000 acres.

According to Post Oak Rules, Blue Water Systems can apply for permits to produce up to two acre-feet/year of groundwater for each contiguous acre owned or controlled by Blue Water Systems. Although Blue Water Systems only controls 7 percent of the one million acres within Milam and Burleson Counties, they already have production and transport permits that equal 21 percent of the total available groundwater supply. The Post Oak Groundwater Management Plan estimates that 149,000 acre-feet of groundwater is usable per year in Milam and Burleson Counties.

So, what happens to groundwater levels when all eight wells are drilled and pumping 10 billion gallons of groundwater per year? Blue Water Systems was required to run groundwater models to predict the result of their pumping requests. According to the map that The Cameron Herald reviewed, the drawdowns for the Deep Simsboro after 30 years of pumping will be (as measured from the center of the well field): 250 feet at two miles; 200 feet at seven miles; 150 feet at nine

miles; and 100 feet at 22 miles. The assumptions regarding other Deep Simsboro aquifer wells were not clarified.

The other groundwater-use epicenter is located just South of Rockdale at Alcoa.

Around Dec. 14, 2005, Alcoa filed 60 historic use production permit applications for a total of 33,685 acre-feet/year (11 billion gallons) of groundwater.

One year later, Gary Westbrook, Post Oak General manager, informed Alcoa that he contested each of the applications.

A series of meetings and negotiations ensued over the following months until a settlement was reached and approved at last week's meeting of the Post Oak Board of Directors. The "Agreement" was dated Nov. 13 and signed by Westbrook and Tommy Hodges, Mining and Power Manager, Rockdale Operations, Alcoa. Although the negotiations occurred over a period of almost ten months, the Post Oak Board approved the agreement with almost no discussion.

The highlights of the agreement include:

€ the historic use production permit was approved for only 15,000 acre-feet/year (Alcoa had requested 33,685 acre-feet/year);

€ Alcoa agreed not to pursue other applications for historic use production permits;

€ Alcoa paid \$81,500 as a one-time fee for the 15,000 acre-feet/year approved but produced prior to the agreement; and

€ the permit will expire Dec. 31, 2038.

According to the historic use production permit issued to Alcoa, the groundwater can be used only for "the non-wasteful purpose of producing water for industrial purposes..."

Alcoa will pay Post Oak \$98,000/year in production fees associated with the approved permit.

Insight about the demand for the groundwater below Milam and Burleson Counties can be glimpsed by the following list of claims for the groundwater: Blue Water Systems - 31,000 acre-feet/year; Alcoa - 15,000 acre-feet/year; approved historic use production permits besides Alcoa - 20,000 acre-feet/year; municipalities - 10,000 acre-feet/year; 2,069 registered exempt wells - production amount unknown.

Although Post Oak has not set a total production limit for Milam and Burleson Counties based on the number of gallons, it has established management zones, monitoring wells, and drawdown levels that will trigger action by Post Oak. If the drawdown triggers are reached, Post Oak can set production limits more stringent than the current 2 acre-feet/year per contiguous acre.

As stated in the Post Oak Groundwater Management Plan: "Production will be regulated as

needed to conserve groundwater, preserve groundwater availability, and protect groundwater users, in a manner not to unnecessarily and adversely limit production or impact the economic viability of the groundwater users, public and private. In consideration of the importance of groundwater availability to the economy and culture of the District, the District will identify and engage in such activities and practices that will permit groundwater production and, as appropriate, protect the aquifer and groundwater availability by reducing permitted production of groundwater.”

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