

Proposed drought restrictions on aquifer are harsher

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If drought comes again to the Edwards Aquifer region, cutbacks on water usage will come earlier and go deeper than they ever have under rules approved this month by the board of the Edwards Aquifer Authority. The Legislature ordered the rule changes in May in a compromise that also raised by 23 percent the annual amount of water that can be taken from the aquifer.

In exchange for getting more water in good times, aquifer users agreed to cut back sooner and more drastically in bad times to try to keep water flowing from springs that sustain endangered species and downstream users.

Now, instead of municipal pumpers such as the San Antonio Water System having to cut back 5 percent when the aquifer level in Bexar County drops to 650 feet above sea level and 10 percent when it drops to 640 feet, they'll have to cut back by 20 percent when it drops to 660 feet and 30 percent when it drops to 650 feet.

But still, at least until 2009, homeowners in San Antonio aren't likely to see a city declaration of Stage I drought conditions unless the aquifer level falls to 650 feet.

"We're pretty much treating this as if we don't have to go back to the city right now and ask for any changes," said Janelle Okorie, SAWS vice president of strategic resource and business planning.

That's because of several reasons, she said.

First, the cutbacks aren't as drastic as they appear because the aquifer authority already was forcing an 18 percent reduction on most pumpers even before the drought plan kicked in through a process known as the junior-senior permitting system.

Under that system, municipal pumpers' allocations were divided into junior and senior permits, and the junior amounts could not be used when the aquifer level fell to 665 feet.

"A 20 percent cut at 660 feet is essentially the same situation," Okorie said.

"The second principal reason is essentially just the likelihood that we'll see further changes in EAA critical period rules in the very near future," she said.

Senate Bill 3, which raised the pumping cap and changed the drought triggers, also set up an Edwards Aquifer Recovery Implementation Program that by the end of next year is to issue recommendations that could again result in changes to the authority's drought rules.

"So in terms of just trying to make sure that we give consistent information to our customers and that we can keep them motivated and engaged with us, we're not going to propose any changes to the municipal ordinance," Okorie said.

A third reason is abundant rainfall this year, which left aquifer levels in good shape.

"I think the projections we're looking at now don't anticipate any Stage I restrictions on the Edwards next year," she said.

Okorie said SAWS officials believe they have the resources to handle any drought situation that could arise before new drought rules may be put in place in 2009.

Officials at Bexar Metropolitan Water District, the region's second-largest water utility, say the same.

"It's really not going to impact us that much because of our diverse water supply portfolio," said Humberto Ramos, BexarMet's water resources manager.

"To not contribute to confusion, we'll stick to whatever drought rules the city has and to whatever SAWS does since SAWS is the largest purveyor," Ramos said.

When the Legislature raised the pumping cap, it allowed the authority to restore some rights that had been disallowed. The way the cutback formulas work, a utility had to gain almost 12 percent in pumping rights to have the same amount of rights as it did under the rules in place last year.

Otherwise, if severe drought strikes, utilities falling short will have to replace those Edwards supplies with other sources or buy or lease more Edwards pumping rights.

The final drought rules adopted by the aquifer authority are not expected to be significantly different from the rules the board adopted this month. But the authority could add another aquifer pool in the San Marcos area with different drought triggers, just as Uvalde County has its separate pool and triggers now.

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