Hope for springs may not be eternal

There are few resources in Texas considered more precious than its natural springs.

They feed the creeks and rivers that crisscross the state's arid landscape, providing humans, livestock, wildlife and fauna alike with a critical supply of water.

Yet, after hundreds of years of depending on springs, our knowledge of them is woefully lacking and booming development is threatening to dry them up, aquatic biologist Chad Norris told a group of citizens in Grey Forest on Sunday afternoon.

"We need more holistic watershed management," said Norris, who works for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. "I can't imagine not having a cool stream to dip my feet into, or I can't imagine my son not having one when he is my age."

Since 2003, Norris and a handful of state biologists have been trying to update the state's inventory and knowledge of springs through fieldwork and by piecing together snippets of information from countless landowners.

The update has been a long time coming.

The book that is considered the foundation of information on the state's springs, "Springs of Texas," is nearly three decades old. "Springs of Texas" outlines roughly 2,000 springs throughout 183 of the state's 254 counties, but recent fieldwork shows that there may be as many as five times that number, Norris said.

For instance, U.S. Geological Survey maps, which rely on historical data, show 36 springs in Bandera County, but recent fieldwork has found 131. In Real County, USGS maps show 23 springs, while recent fieldwork found 199.

The issue, which was discussed at a meeting of the Hill Country Planning Association on Sunday, is gaining momentum at what some consider a critical time. The Texas Legislature has given groundwater conservation districts until the end of the year to set their "desired future conditions" for the state's aquifers. The process will help state water planners determine how much water can be pumped from the ground in the next 50 years.

But because of the lack of information on springs, people like Annalisa Peace of the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance worry that the process will ignore spring flow and

guarantee that future generations will have a difficult time finding a natural spring in Texas and that the wildlife that depends on the springs will die out.

"It's ridiculous, because they don't have the information," Peace said.

The notion that springs can run dry is not new. The state compiled a list of 281 major springs in 1975. By that time, 65 had completely failed.

The issue hit home to residents of Grey Forest, in rural northwest Bexar County, which relies on the Trinity Aquifer for its water. Many said they have seen the water levels drop significantly in recent years and have had to spend thousands of dollars deepening wells or drilling new ones altogether.

HCPA Chairwoman and Grey Forest City Council member Jennifer Nottingham said she wasn't surprised by anything she learned at the lecture. She said it only reinforced what she has witnessed in roughly five decades, off and on, in Grey Forest.

As a child, she remembers Helotes Creek running year-round during wet years, but said it never happens anymore. The continuing development and pressure on the groundwater worries Nottingham.

"If we abuse the water or lose the water, if we drain the aquifer or pollute the aquifer, then the way of life we know is gone," she said.