

San Marcos DAILY RECORD

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Flowing, but slowing

River signals need for rain – and conservation

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News Editor

San Marcos — You can see it at Sewell Park, where the stand of endangered Texas wild rice pokes above the moving stream. Those who visit the San Marcos River regularly see it at all their favorite spots: Stream flow is falling.

To newcomers, the lower river level might seem an aberration, as plentiful rains in the first part of 2007 pushed flow to near-record levels. But the truth is, despite sporadic rains, drought in the region continues and as it does, residents may be facing mandatory water conservation measures.

"It's not too early to start taking steps to conserve," said Jan Klein, water conservation coordinator for the city of San Marcos. "Any conservation measures now voluntarily taken can possibly prolong that period" before Stage I rules would have to be invoked.

The city's rules were rewritten in 2006, Klein said, but the 2007 Texas Legislature wrote its own. According to the new legislation, Stage I rules go into effect when the Edwards Aquifer J-17 Index Well at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio falls below 660 feet above mean sea level or the flow at San Marcos Springs drops below 96 cubic feet per second (cfs) over a period of 10 days.

On Tuesday, the J-17 well measured 673.9, which is 7.5 feet above the historic average for May. The last 10-day average was 674.1.

During spring irrigation season, as well as hot summer days, the J-17 well has been known to drop a foot a day. San Marcos Springs, meanwhile, were flowing at 142 cfs on Thursday, 41 cfs below the historic monthly average for May and 68 cfs lower than a year ago. The last 10-day average for San Marcos Springs is 145.3 cfs.

Klein noted that for residents of the city, there are year-round conservation rules that prohibit wasting water; irrigating with hose-end or automatic sprinkler systems between the hours of 10 a.m. and 8 p.m.; holding charity car washes anywhere but a certified commercial car wash; limiting non-commercial vehicle washing to being done with a hand-held bucket or hand-held hose with a positive shutoff device, and operating non-recirculating decorative water features.

Because last year started out so wet, city residents went the entire season without any additional rules but, she warned, this year will probably be different.

"It's looking like we probably will this year," she said.

There is something new in Stage I restrictions that residents need to be aware of, she said.

"When we do go into Stage I restrictions, people will be limited to watering one day per week (with sprinklers) on a designated day."

Dianne Wassenich of the San Marcos River Foundation said she's even gotten calls from people about the "unsightly grass" in the river by University Drive.

That is the stand of wild rice that pokes out of the water a little more every day; and one Wassenich likes to make a point about.

"If it weren't for this endangered species, the aquifer would have been pumped down to levels that dried up our springs years ago," she wrote in a recent e-mail. "Because the federal government has to protect endangered species, Texas was forced to regulate groundwater pumping for the first time in this region. We hope to keep this rice not only alive but healthy, and helping us keep our river alive for years to come."

Wassenich, too, urged people to start saving water now.

"We've got to conserve all we can because who knows? What we conserve today may be what keeps (the river) flowing if this drought goes on."

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