

Facing a water 'calamity'

By Elena Tucker - Staff Writer , Boerne Star

Levels of the Trinity Aquifer, key groundwater source for the Boerne area, are dropping alarmingly, according to the Texas Water Development Board.

A computer model developed by the TWDB projects that aquifer levels in terrain around the Cibolo Creek will drop as much as 100 feet within the next two years and could be utterly depleted in some places by the year 2030.

But, even that prediction may shine a bit too bright. Cow Creek Groundwater District Board President Tommy Matthews said some Kendall County wells, including high-use public pumping stations, may not enjoy that kind of longevity. Some of the wells have dropped as much as 55 feet in the past two weeks, Matthews said.

Without remedial action, certain portions of the groundwater supply are expected to completely dry up within 10 years.

"We have some deep concerns for both the short term and the long term," Matthews said.

The TWDB predictors are being used both to assess water-management strategies and to understand declines in water level as increasing demands and potential drought exact their toll. By working with computer projections and water management authorities, Matthews said, local control agencies such as Cow Creek, are able to answer questions like, "What do we want the aquifer to look like in 50 years?"

Subsequent implementations, intended to protect the future and present health of area groundwater, are providing a guarded sense of optimism.

But Matthews confesses that his hopefulness, even in view of best-case scenarios, is shaky.

"All it takes," he said, "is one big developer with deep pockets who wants to sue the water board."

Such a developer, Matthews continued, doesn't have to be "right," just well-funded and tenacious.

"We're like David against Goliath without a stone to put in the sling," Matthews said.

But however helpful the computer model, nobody can be sure just how the Trinity Aquifer will respond to a drought that has, within the past few months, begun to overshadow historically significant dry epochs.

"Since October, we've had less rain than during the worst drought on record," Matthews said.

It's not even known how long it might take for the aquifer to regain normal levels once rains begin to fall again. Although Trinity Aquifer limestone provides southern Kendall County with some of the best water around, the very quality of that rock also means that the aquifer may be slow to reabsorb water.

This type of data, said Matthews, has never been collected.

While the nature of the aquifer may be hard to predict, habits of area residents are more easily prophesied - Kendall County citizens are still using water as a perpetually abundant resource.

One man recently called a local drilling company to report that after filling up his swimming pool, his well had gone dry.

"I wanted to tell him that he'd better get some buckets ready to haul water out of his pool," the drilling company employee said. "He's going to need it to flush his toilets and wash his dishes."

Landscape watering hasn't slowed down either. If anything, as weather becomes hotter and dryer, sprinkler usage is all too easy to forecast. When the temperature hits 80 degrees, people water their lawns, Matthews said.

"The bulk of our demand is still drawn by lawn irrigation," Matthews said.

This is just one of the consumer perspectives that, according to Matthews, must change.

"There will be limits," he said in regard to the future.

Those limits include the manner in which individuals and businesses use water, and way in which permits for new wells are issued.

Limits or not, optimistic or not, even the water board directors like Matthews don't and can't have all the answers in the face of the many variables affecting south Kendall County water and its purest source, the Trinity Aquifer. But what Matthews does know is that the Hill Country is essentially an arid place that often pretends to be otherwise.

According to Matthews, the consequences for disregarding geographic and climatic realities could be dire.

"By 2015, south Kendall County is projected to have serious, serious problems unless brakes are put on with the intentional objective of avoiding a calamity," Matthews said.

This "calamity," he clarified, means private and public wells with no water.

"Not dry for just a few hours," he said. "Just dry."

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