

Too Many Straws in the Well

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Jacob's Well
Courtesy of WFWA

Aside from the marked drop in local farm produce in the region, another worrisome sign of the deepening impact of droughts and groundwater pumping is the recent cessation of water flow from Jacob's Well, a Hill Country haven for swimmers and picnickers. The well, just northwest of Wimberley, is a perpetual artesian spring that feeds Cypress Creek from water in the Trinity Aquifer. Having withstood withering droughts over the years, the well's current dry spell is only the second time in recorded history that the spring has stopped flowing.

The U.S. Geological Survey operates measuring instruments inside Jacob's Well which detect the flow of water in terms of cubic feet per second. Recently, the flow has fallen below one-half cubic foot per second, which is low enough to cause the well to drop to nothing when the various water companies in the area turn on their pumps. Andrew Backus, board president of the Hays Trinity Groundwater Conservation District, points to water giant Aqua Texas as a key contributor to the well's parched state. "We are fairly certain that Woodcreek's Aqua Texas wells are directly impacting Jacob's Well, and there's a possibility that other major production wells in the Wimberley area are also impacting flow," Backus said.

The Wimberley area has seen explosive growth and development over the last eight years, placing a strain on local resources. "We've had so much growth and new demand on the aquifer we're beginning to outstrip what nature can provide us here," said conservation district board member Jack Hollon. "I think we've got to come to terms with that."

A central problem is the district's limited resources. "Our enabling budget back in 2001 really limited the sources of funding for this district. We do not have any taxing authority, and we also are not allowed to charge pumping fees like the Barton Springs [Edwards Aquifer Conservation] District does." Production fees on permitted wells and funding from the city of Austin provide the bulk of the BS/EACD's funding.

As an example of the greater impact development is having on droughts, Hollon cites the "drought of record" from the 1950s, which lasted seven years – but during which time Jacob's Well kept flowing. If the drought continues, "there's not much we can do in the short term to alleviate this situation other than conserve," said Hollon. Long-term solutions center around reducing the demand on the aquifer. One potential solution is to fix leaky pipes that can lose precious gallons. And rainwater collection, he says, is "our real future."

Backus is more dire in his predictions. He says the loss of water flow from Jacob's Well is "evidence of what's to come. At some point, the community has to decide what the total [pumping] limit from the aquifer is and what frequency they want to tolerate [to keep] the well spring from going dry."

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