

## **Limits on Water Use May Come Earlier**

### **Express-News**

**12/2008**

By Jerry Needham - Express-News San Antonio finished 2008 with the driest 16-month September-through-December in recorded history, with less than an inch of rain in the past four months and climate scientists saying the dry conditions could last into next fall.

"It's really been an extraordinarily dry period," said Karen Guz, conservation director for the San Antonio Water System, which will start a process Tuesday to make drought restrictions kick in sooner.

"We can't afford to presume this drought will be brief," said Guz, who will ask the SAWS board to request that the City Council change the ordinance to make drought restrictions start when the Edwards Aquifer falls to 660 feet above sea level instead of the current trigger of 650 feet.

"It will mean restrictions for our customers a couple of months earlier, but it saves a lot of water, and that's water that we could need if this drought continues," Guz said.

The area drought already is classified as exceptional, the worst category. That means residents can expect widespread crop and pasture losses and shortages of water in reservoirs, streams and wells.

The 16.4 inches of rain that has fallen since Sept. 1, 2007, is more than an inch less than the next-driest such period, which occurred at the end of the seven-year drought of the 1950s.

With only 13.76 inches of rain, 2008 ended as the third-driest year since rainfall record-keeping began in 1871. And the 0.98 inches recorded since Sept. 1 this year marked only the third time that less than an inch of rain has fallen during any four-month period, according to National Weather Service data.

Although most rivers are running at less than 25 percent of normal and most area lakes are at 55 percent to 80 percent of capacity, the Edwards Aquifer so far hasn't dropped to any of the trigger points for mandatory cutbacks on pumpers.

But officials say that could change as farmers start irrigating their fields later this month.

The aquifer's level Wednesday at the index well in San Antonio was at 669.5 feet above sea level. That's 0.4 feet above the historical December level and 9.5 feet above the trigger for mandatory 20 percent cutbacks for pumpers.

San Marcos Springs is more of a concern. Its average flow on Tuesday was 98 cubic feet per second, just 2 cfs above the trigger for the 20 percent Stage I cutbacks by the Edwards Aquifer Authority. The 98 cfs is 76 cfs below the norm for December.

And the outlook for relief is bleak. The latest weekly forecast by scientists for the weather phenomenon known as La Niña indicates it's strengthening and could last into next fall.

La Niña, an upwelling of cold water in the Pacific Ocean, changes wind and moisture circulation patterns, generally bringing drier conditions to Central Texas.

La Niña started this dry spell in 2007 and officially ended in June, when sea surface temperatures in the Pacific rose above the official trigger for such conditions. But scientists say a global circulation pattern typical of La Niña has continued and now strengthened with sea surface temperatures again dropping below the trigger.

Roland Ruiz, spokesman for the Edwards authority, said farmers west of San Antonio soon would begin irrigating fields to get deep moisture for crops that will start to go in next month.

"Historically, when we see irrigation start, we see an impact on the aquifer," he said. "Based on what we've seen, it could be early in January that we see the need to declare Stage I."

More typically, usage restrictions are triggered in the heat of the summer when demand is high, Ruiz said.

Jim Dutton, co-owner of a Texas-based foundation repair company and national treasurer of the Foundation Repair Association, said this drought is as bad as previous ones for foundations, but calls aren't coming in like usual.

He blames that on the economic downturn and people's concerns about spending money.

Dutton said the concern is houses built on clay soils, which shrink when they dry and expand when they get wet. The trick to avoiding problems, he said, is to maintain even moisture levels in the soil around a foundation. That can be done by laying a soaker hose 12 inches to 18 inches from the foundation and running it for 15 minutes twice a day, he said.

As far as the short-term forecast, there's a slight chance for rain through noon today, but a better chance as a cold front moves in Sunday night and Monday, said Bob Fogarty, meteorologist with the National Weather Service's forecast office in New Braunfels.

"It could be a quarter of an inch," he said.

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