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ENVIRONMENT

As groundwater levels drop, people begin hauling in water

Along with drought, population growth and density of wells also to blame, specialists say.

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The drought has gotten so bad in the Hill Country that when the twin grandchildren of Bob Sharpe visit his place near Nutty Brown Road, they have to take an outdoor "cowboy shower" by having grandmother Sue Sharpe dump water on them from a bucket.

For three months, his well has been dry, so several times a day, Bob Sharpe steers his blue Chevy pickup to the nearby Cedar Valley Grocery, which gets its water from a Colorado River pipeline, to fill his 200-gallon plastic tank, plus a dozen emptied Newman's Own grape juice jugs strewn across the truck bed.

This drought marks the first time he has faced water problems, said Sharpe, who has lived on the property since 1981. He uses the hauled-in water for his vegetable garden, to flush toilets and do dishes, and to keep the lining of his swimming pool from drying out.

Even as the steady, very visible drop of Lakes Travis and Buchanan has gained notoriety, the well water that many people in the Hill Country rely on from underground aquifers has also been sucked dry.

The issue is exacerbated, water specialists say, by the rapidly increasing number of pumps, like straws into a tall glass of Coke, that reach into the aquifers beneath the booming areas of northern Hays and western Travis counties.

Groundwater districts are scrambling to exert whatever authority they have to cut back on pumping.

In an effort to respond to the severity of the drought, the groundwater district that regulates pumping in the Barton Springs portion of the Edwards Aquifer will hold a hearing Thursday on whether to add an entirely new category to its pumping restrictions.

Under "exceptional stage drought" rules, the district would restrict pumping by 40 percent.

Water from beneath the district, which currently restricts pumping by 30 percent, serves at least 50,000 people in northern Hays and southern Travis counties.

"We may very well have to tell some of our permittees that using water for things that are not public drinking water supplies — golf course irrigation, football field and soccer use, industrial uses, dust suppression — that public water supplies have a higher use," said Kirk Holland, the general manager of the Barton Springs/Edwards Aquifer Conservation District, "and when push comes to shove, we need to be in a position to say public water supplies have a priority."

Drinking water is already in jeopardy in parts of the region.

About a 15-minute drive from Sharpe's place, small traffic jams of homeowners and water haulers have formed in front of the bulk water collection center in downtown Dripping Springs.

The Dripping Springs Water Supply Corp., which operates the center, essentially a high-powered spigot dishing out Colorado River water from a Lower Colorado River Authority pipeline, sells the water for $8 per 1,000 gallons. It is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and is basically serving as a fail-safe measure as underground water becomes increasingly hard to come by.

In July, about 230 individual customers and five hauling companies took away 1.7 million gallons of water, said Doug Cones, the general manager of the corporation. This month, they have filled up 1.4 million gallons worth of tanks and jugs.

The haulers say they take water to homeowners whose wells have gone dry, or whose rainwater collection systems have had no rain to collect.

"We're going to need Noah's flood to rectify the situation," said Bill Fivecoat, who works at least 70 hours a week hauling water in a 2,200-gallon truck for the Agua Dulce delivery service.

The drought also has been a boon for drilling companies suffering through a slowdown in home construction.

Bee Cave Drilling just added three new people to answer phones, said owner Jim Blair.

He said part of the problem is with the density of water wells.

"When there's a high density of wells pumping lots of water, the water doesn't flow to your neighborhood as fast as you would want to," Blair said. "It's like living in a subdivision and instead of having a 10-inch water line, you have a 3-inch water line, so that when everyone uses at once, there's huge loss of pressure."

Cones says that his home well, on the Glen Rose Aquifer, gets so little water that he has to wait as long as two hours to take a shower and until 11 p.m. to wash clothes or do dishes — after many of his neighbors have stopped using their water.

"It stems from too many wells on the aquifer," he said. "You could have a tremendous amount of rain, but if you take out faster than (the aquifer) can recharge, you're always going to be in a drought."

On Tuesday, as part of its new development regulations three years in the works, the Hays County Commissioners Court decided that new development in the western part of the county generally had to have minimum lot size of six acres if served exclusively by groundwater.

Signs of how the drought has ravaged underground water are not hard to come by.

Jacob's Well, which is the primary source of Hays County's Cypress Creek, has "virtually no flow," said David Baker, executive director of the Wimberley Valley Watershed Association, a land trust working to protect the Cypress Creek watershed and the land around Jacob's Well.

He said the average summer flow is between 7 and 10 cubic feet per second, and got down as low as 2.5 cubic feet per second during the 1950s drought.

"There's a tremendous concern that the aquatic life can't survive under these conditions," Baker said.

Baker said the estimated 6,500 wells in western Hays County have taxed groundwater resources even as the drought drags on.

Raymond Slade, a hydrologist retired from the United States Geological Survey who now does work for the Hill Country Alliance, a group that promotes limited development of the region, said that based on stream flows and other drought indicators , "there have probably been three or four droughts worse than this one."

"The reason this drought feels more pronounced is because of more demand for water," Slade said.

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