

Panel OKs proposal to manage aquifer

Plan aims to limit pumping, raise fees and save habitat.

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SEGUIN — With tears in his eyes, Robert Gulley thanked the members of the Edwards Aquifer Recovery Implementation Program on Monday for achieving what most of them at one time had thought was impossible.

After four years of monthly meetings, the group, led by Gulley, agreed on a plan to manage the Edwards Aquifer and protect endangered species that depend on springs in San Marcos and New Braunfels.

Representing interests that ranged from farmers in Uvalde to Dow Chemical on the coast, with environmentalists in between, the steering committee voted 24-1 with one abstention in a meeting room that looked down on the Guadalupe River.

“This is a historic day in Texas,” said Jerry James, who represents the city of Victoria. “No one has ever been able to get this diverse of a group of stakeholders to agree on a solution for the Edwards issue.”

The agreement comes as the region is under watering restrictions because of a yearlong drought that is on pace to match or surpass the worst ever recorded in Texas.

The plan, expected to cost \$18.5 million a year, calls for greater limits on pumping from the aquifer during droughts and higher pumping fees that will pay for habitat improvements at the springs and for water conservation and storage projects.

The plan still needs to be approved by the board of the Edwards Aquifer Authority, which is expected to vote on it next month, and then the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Because of the drought's severity and the long-term forecast for it to continue, Karl Dreher, general manager of the EAA, said he would recommend to his board that it does not wait for federal approval to start work.

The biggest and most expensive measures will be paying farmers not to pump during a drought and storing water in an underground reservoir owned by the San Antonio Water System. The tricky part for the EAA, Dreher said, is to figure out how to implement the pumping fee, starting next year, to pay for those projects.

But he said the drought has left the EAA with no time to spare.

“I have been in personal contact with many meteorologists and climatologists, and none of them have any hope of the drought ending in the next six months,” he said.

Beyond that, the forecasters have little certainty, but a continuation of the drought has to factor into planning, Dreher said.

SAWS, the largest pumper from the aquifer, estimates that the program will increase bills for the average water customer by \$3.13 a month.

But that could be reduced because those downstream of the springs that benefit from their flow, such as the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority, Dow Chemical and CPS Energy, have pledged to make annual contributions totaling \$740,000.

The alternative to the increased pumping fees was for pumping from the Edwards to be cut by 87 percent at the first sign of a drought, according to studies paid for by the steering committee. That's a prospect that all agreed would be unworkable.

If the plan is approved by the Fish and Wildlife Service, a permit will be issued that will end a 20-year threat of the federal government taking over management of the aquifer.

In 1991, that threat was very real.

In those days, James said, it was unprecedented for Victoria to join the Sierra Club when it successfully sued Texas in federal court for not limiting pumping from the Edwards.

Times have changed, and with his vote Monday, James allied his city with its former opponents in court that had threatened to dry up the Guadalupe River, Victoria's water source, by overpumping from the Edwards.

Although they support the plan overall, Buck Benson, who represents industrial pumpers, and Bruce Alexander, who represents small utilities, said they think the pumping fees are unfair.

By state law, agriculture pumping fees from the Edwards are limited to \$2 per acre-foot, which is 325,851 gallons. Under the plan, municipal and industrial pumpers will pay up to \$116 per acre-foot.

They were not alone in their angst about the fees, but the group had to move forward.

The vote was called, and the tally showed only one vote against, by Alexander, and one abstention, by Benson.

It was testament to the leadership of Gulley, and the group gave him a standing ovation.

Looking out from behind a lectern, Gulley bowed his head and regained his composure.

“I am proud to be part of the solution,” he said.

Read more: <http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/environment/article/Panel-OKs-proposal-to-manage-aquifer-2257527.php#ixzz1d7zNW3x8>

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