

Environmental group, San Antonio covet Guadalupe's water

River battle a stream of consciences

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By RANDY LEE LOFTIS / The Dallas Morning News

NEW BRAUNFELS, Texas – Kevin Webb knows there are many ways to measure the worth of a river. Some of them, he says, don't show up on a meter – like the emerald glow that the Guadalupe takes on toward evening.

"That, to me, means more than my paycheck," said Mr. Webb, who runs Rockin R River Rides, a New Braunfels float-trip outfitter. "A river doesn't have to do anything to be valuable. All it has to do is be."

But the Guadalupe's agenda is busier now than 313 years ago, when Spanish explorer Alonzo de Leon named it for Our Lady of Guadalupe. In its trip from the Hill Country to the Gulf coast, it is drunk, waded in, floated in, fished in, dammed, pushed and pulled – a 300-mile-long liquid symbol of new urban demands and new environmental resistance.

The stakes are about to go even higher. Before long, state officials must decide whether a river has a right to keep its own water.

The state's environmental agency is considering a permit application that would assign water rights to an environmental group, just as cities, river authorities, ranchers, companies and others also have water rights.

The nonprofit San Marcos River Foundation, a 17-year-old group with a history of fighting threats to Central Texas rivers, wants rights to some of the Guadalupe's unallocated flow. The group doesn't want to pump or divert or sell the water, but to keep it in the river – to protect the bays and estuaries that lie at the river's mouth.

But the foundation, which borrowed \$25,000 against its \$100,000 endowment to pay a state application fee, isn't alone in coveting the river's water. San Antonio wants it, too, for its growth. The city has struck a deal with the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority to deliver some of that water to the west.

PROJECT TEXAS

This story is part of a collaboration among Belo-owned news organizations that explores the causes and conditions contributing to the state's poor environmental performance.

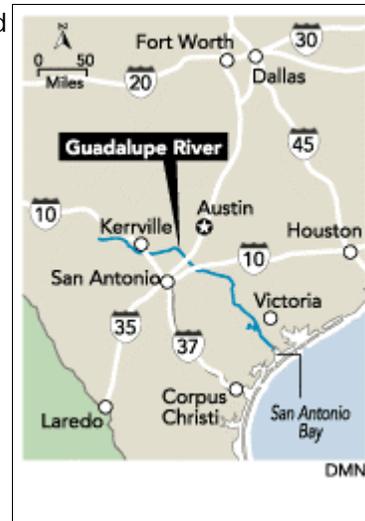
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Go to KHOU.com for reports from Houston, Austin, Dallas, San Antonio and Belo's Washington, D.C., bureau as well as for related resources and links.

"We're doing this for the common good of all Texans," said the foundation's Dianne Wassenich, who said she watched for years as the river's water was allocated, "piece by piece," to every use but its own health.

"It's important that Texans keep the bays and estuaries alive," said Ms. Wassenich, who expects the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission to finish paperwork next month on the July 2000 application. "How many people would want to visit a coast that's dead?"

The standoff could keep lawyers and consultants busy for years. But strip away the details, says Bill West, the river authority's general manager, and one fact remains: "Metropolitan San Antonio is not going to go without water."



But the real prize, he said, is the future. "When you step back from it," Mr. West said, "it becomes a growth or no-growth issue."

Humble beginnings

The Guadalupe's journey is not a long one, as rivers measure things, from its origin to San Antonio Bay. But it sees many changes in its short life.

It rises on eastern slopes of rocky hills 33 miles west of Kerrville, 2,000 feet above the sea. At the farthest point where a map first marks its North Fork, the bed is just a dry and stony wash, where young deer graze and hidden birds rattle among brittle, spiky wildflowers of purple, yellow and red.



ERICH SCHLEGEL / DMN

Brian Boyce, 15, of San Antonio swings into the spring-fed waters near the U.S. Highway 281 bridge north of San Antonio.

Downstream, the river gains spring water so clear that tiny fish along the banks look almost invisible and bigger ones in deeper water seem to be suspended in air. A light wind ripples the water into a houndstooth check just before a late spring shower dimples the surface.

The Guadalupe runs out through lonely cattle country until captured by Canyon Dam, a 1.3-mile-long earthen speed bump that backs up nearly 13 square miles of water. Below the dam at New Braunfels, Comal Springs gives the river a downhill shove through flat and open territory.

At Gonzales, birthplace of the Texas revolution, the San Marcos joins in, and together the greenish waters make their last slow run through a corridor of dark trees.

Because the rivers are spring-fed, they are different from rain-fed streams like the Trinity. "Until man interferes, you have flows," said Dr. Randy Moss of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

The springs nurture rich communities of fish and some unique species. Biologists say that except for some introduced species, the rivers are in pretty good shape. Fish species documented in 1955 are still found today, Dr. Moss said.

But more groundwater pumping for more people will affect both the river species and the animals that live in hidden watery holes beneath the ground, said Kevin Mayes, a state biologist. That's because the rivers and the aquifers – underground water sources – are directly linked. "There's a cascading effect," he said.

Central Texas river species adapted long ago to drought, an argument used by cities and other entities that need water. But as urban demands rise, said Dr. Moss, shortages expected only once a decade now come every two or three years.

"Aquatic systems just don't have time to recover," he said.

Past Victoria, the land around the river begins to dissolve into marshy delta. The river ambles under darkening skies past distant industrial skylines: the all-night electric lights of chemical plants.

At the last highway crossing, Texas 35, no sign honors the Guadalupe's end. The only sign marks its dredge-dug neighbor, the Victoria Barge Canal.

Flow of ideas

The San Marcos River Foundation first thought that 915,000 acre-feet of water would be enough to feed the estuary – that is, to provide the right mix of salt and fresh for the species that pass their youth in coastal waters.

When the group found a 1998 state study putting the need at 1.15 million acre-feet, it amended its papers. In layman's terms, that increased the need from 298 billion gallons a year to 363 billion.

That might seem like a lot, but Dr. Larry McKinney, the parks and wildlife department's aquatic resources director, said new figures put the river's unallocated flow at 1.5 million acre-feet. That would mean there's enough to go around, knocking the worry that water for nature means none for people, Dr. McKinney said.

"Given that, what's the argument about?" he asked.

But the river authority's Mr. West questions the biologists' numbers. Using them, he said, might mean not enough water for people in the future.

He also said he doesn't think the foundation's permit is legal. No matter how much the coastal economy might rely on healthy habitats, state law doesn't list bays and estuaries as a "beneficial use" of water for permits; city water, by contrast, is the highest legal use. When the authority files with the state to take water for San Antonio, Mr. West said, "they'll have two competing permit applications before them: one that complies with the current law and one that doesn't."

He also argued that the foundation's plan would privatize water. "Should a non-regulated entity be the steward of an environmental resource for the public?" he asked.

The foundation's lawyers don't think the beneficial-use argument holds water, Ms. Wassenich said. And she dismissed the concern over privatized water, noting that Texas water has always been privatized. Until a recent move toward more regulation, any landowner could pump groundwater without restriction or oversight. And most owners of Texas surface-water rights are private entities, she said.

Besides, the foundation won't keep the rights; it plans to give them to Texas Parks and Wildlife.

On one point, though, all parties agree: The contest is ultimately over Texas' future.

"This is not a people-versus-creatures dispute," Ms. Wassenich said. "It is about people and their economic viability and the natural heritage of all Texans."

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Nadine Jungman of San Antonio takes a floating holiday from work on the Guadalupe River above Spring Branch.