



NEWS

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Region L Water Plan is Blueprint for Future

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SEGUIN.....Water recommendations developed by the South Central Texas Region L Water Planning Group are a blueprint to help meet this region's future needs, said Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority general manager Bill West. Region L spans three major river basins (the Guadalupe, San Antonio and Nueces) and represents 20 ½ counties, including all ten counties in GBRA's statutory district.

West wants people to realize how important the next year will be, as proposals developed by all sixteen statewide Regional Planning Groups are submitted to the Texas Water Development Board (TWDB) and then consolidated into a single plan for review by the 2001 Texas Legislature.

Water planning is not new to Texas or to this region. The 1961 Water Plan was Texas' first attempt to address water requirements and was a direct response to the devastating 1947-1957 drought of record that dried up Comal Springs for 144 days in 1956. Prophetically, the plan warned of additional disasters if "development of the State's water resources is neglected."

Before the 1950's drought, pumping demand from groundwater wells was so slight that it had little impact on the abundant Edwards Aquifer or its outlets at Comal and San Marcos Springs. Today, increased groundwater pumping to meet the needs of a growing population is responsible for declining aquifer levels and reduced springflows, especially during times of below-normal rainfall and low recharge.

West hopes discussion of the Region L water supply options will help people understand how important Edwards Aquifer springflows are to South Central Texas. Springflows are the headwaters of many of this region's rivers, including the San Antonio, the Comal and the San Marcos, all of which eventually flow into the Guadalupe River and San Antonio Bay.

They are also critically important to maintaining the base flow in the Guadalupe River, often contributing up to 80% of the water in the river during a drought.

"Reduced spring and river flow not only affects people, cities and industries who hold surface water rights but also impacts the coastal ecology and the commercial seafood industry when freshwater inflows are reduced to San Antonio Bay," said West.

As springflow declines at Comal and San Marcos Springs, the habitat for seven endangered and one threatened species also shrinks. In September 2000, Comal Springs reached the level at which the survival of the fountain darter (the Edwards Aquifer's 'canary in the coalmine'), was in jeopardy.

“Springflows are important to the endangered species at Comal and San Marcos Springs,” said West “but the big picture people need to understand is that springflows really affect the quality of life for this entire region.”

When the drought of record ended, major cities such as Dallas and Fort Worth built reservoirs to meet their future water needs, as recommended by the 1961 Texas Water Plan.

The Plan actually discouraged San Antonio from over-reliance on the Edwards Aquifer, noting that irrigation was depleting groundwater supplies needed for future municipal use. It also encouraged the “importation of water from the east” for San Antonio.

Despite this advice, “this region’s response was primarily to drill more groundwater wells. They were inexpensive compared to building reservoirs. And the rule of capture, which allows a landowner to pump unlimited water from under his land without regard to how it affects neighboring wells, actually encouraged this practice,” said West.

In 1968, a new Texas Water Plan advocated preserving flow from Comal and San Marcos Springs to provide “part of downstream surface water supplies . . . as well as enhance the scenic, cultural, and recreational value of the area.” This early justification for a minimum springflow guarantee was based on creating economic and aesthetic benefits for New Braunfels, San Marcos and downstream residents. Interestingly, this was long before the Endangered Species Act of 1973 or the 1990’s litigation over the Edwards Aquifer.

The 1968 plan also recommended that pumping from the Edwards Aquifer should not exceed 400,000 acre-feet annually (an acre-foot is 325,851 gallons). Since then, pumping amounts have been as high as 542,000 acre-feet per year.

Fortunately, since the 1960s, the Edwards Aquifer region has been in a wet cycle, despite periodic short-term droughts. During the 1990’s, Aquifer recharge actually equaled the 1940’s and 1950’s combined. Today, the recharge zones of regional aquifers are being paved over while more people are moving to an area that depends on these aquifers for water.

West points out that Texas is located along the same latitude as many of the Earth’s deserts, and has some of the world’s most variable weather -- with drought one year and flooding the next.

This summer, some well levels in the Trinity Aquifer reached historic lows. The South Texas Watermaster notified water right holders on the Blanco, upper Guadalupe, Medina and San Antonio Rivers that their use of water might be curtailed. The inflow to Canyon Reservoir diminished to less than 10 cubic feet per second (cfs), while the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority (GBRA) was obligated to release 50 cfs from Canyon Reservoir in order to meet downstream needs.

Reduced flow in the Guadalupe River also required the GBRA to inflate its Lower Diversion Dam and Salt Water Barrier near the San Antonio Bay to prevent saline bay water from flowing upriver and contaminating municipal water supplies.

During the last year, West has served on the Region L Water Planning Group, along with eighteen other members representing agriculture, counties, electric utilities, environmental groups, industries, cities, the public, river authorities, small businesses, water districts and water utilities.

The plan submitted by Region L this week to the TWDB is designed to provide this region with water for the next 50 years. According to West, it will require a commitment from everyone if it is to be successful.

Many cities are already responding to meet their future needs. San Marcos and New Braunfels are now primarily surface water users. Boerne and Seguin are also developing alternative water supplies, and Victoria is building its first surface water treatment plant.

West feels strongly that no single water supply in this region can be considered in isolation from neighbors. “If the Region L plan fails to gain support, it will have consequences far beyond our region. For example, the Region K plan that provides future water options for much of the Colorado River Basin is also dependent upon the success of the Region L plan,” said West.

Although Texas water law has yet to recognize this concept, surface and groundwater are interconnected. The Edwards, Trinity, Carrizo-Wilcox and Gulf Coast Aquifers as well as the Guadalupe, San Antonio and Nueces River Basins are regional resources that must be managed conjunctively.

“Water is the key element determining both the sustainability of the region’s environment and its economy. The days when we can rely solely on the Edwards Aquifer have ended. Previous plans to address our water needs gathered dust for lack of support, but now we have a blueprint for tomorrow. It is time for us to all get behind the Region L plan – our future depends on it,” West said.