NEWS

GUADALUPE-BLANCO RIVER AUTHORITY
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Statement on SAWS Action Regarding 2005 Water Resource Plan at their August 16 Board Meeting
Unanimously Adopted by GBRA Board August 17 and Released by General Manager Bill West

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SEGUIN

For the past decade, GBRA worked in good faith with the San Antonio Water System and the San Antonio River Authority to develop the Lower Guadalupe Water Supply Project (LGWSP). This project would have set the standard for regional water cooperation in Texas.

But, when the San Antonio Water System adopted its 2005 Water Resource Plan and dropped out of the LGWSP, it sent strong negative messages to the Guadalupe River Basin, and demonstrated a lack of understanding of how intertwined all water supplies are for this entire region. Truly, water in this region is like a row of dominoes – any change affects everyone.

The LGWSP would have made a substantial amount of water available to San Antonio relatively quickly. GBRA sees nothing in the new SAWS plan that would replace that water in any timely way.

While the SAWS Board at least overturned the staff recommendation that SAWS pursue an additional 35,000 acre feet in pumping rights from the Edwards Aquifer, the Board did not direct staff to seek those additional 35,000 acre feet from new supply sources. Those new water supplies for San Antonio – a growing city with well over 1.2 million people – must come from sources beyond "the usual suspects."

For example, SAWS' intention, as outlined it its plan, to increase pumping from the already beleaguered Trinity Aquifer will mean less water for current Trinity users – including Kendall County, the City of Boerne and significant portions of Comal County – all of which are also experiencing rapid population growth. The Trinity Aquifer has far less capacity and is far less reliable in dry times than the Edwards. This means that additional surface water supplies for these historic Trinity water users will have to be found – and GBRA will have to find them.

Another aspect of the SAWS plan – the storage of water in the Carrizo Aquifer for pumping in times of drought – is also a half-measure at best. There is not enough water in the Carrizo for all the projected dry-time needs of SAWS, Bexar Met, the Seguin-Schertz project and other potential users.

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GBRA still disagrees completely with SAWS' decision to use the 1984 drought – rather than the state-accepted 1950s drought of record – as the basis for their planning. The 1984 drought is not even the second-worst drought on record. Instead, the drought of the mid-60s was worse than 1984.

SAWS' decision to use the 1984 drought for planning borders on irresponsibility – for its own customers and the businesses which drive the San Antonio economy. Don't SAWS ratepayers deserve a better planning system to ensure their own water supply? Simply asserting that "the drought of the '50s was an anomaly" isn't sound science. Ask people in California – and in other western states – if the record droughts they have endured are "anomalies."

The fact is, those droughts – and the drought of the '50s in Texas – have happened, in some cases are still happening and will happen again. Use of a less severe drought on which to base San Antonio's water needs simply transfers the risk to those of us who depend on spring flows in the Guadalupe in time of drought. That includes every city southeast of San Antonio on the Guadalupe – New Braunfels, San Marcos, Seguin, Cuero and Victoria. It also includes the environmentally sensitive San Antonio Bay, with its whooping cranes, commercial fishing fleet and recreational fishery.

Region L, the state-mandated regional water planning group, still has the responsibility of developing a 50-year water plan for this area – which includes the Guadalupe and San Antonio River basins and San Antonio itself. The bottom line is that no one today has any sense of certainty over where those supplies will come from for this rapidly growing area of Texas.

All water projects are difficult, expensive, controversial and time-consuming. Leadership strong enough to withstand the slings and arrows of criticism – including legal fights – is the only way to make a water project happen.

GBRA entered into the Lower Guadalupe Water Supply Project (LGWSP) with SAWS and the San Antonio River Authority for the express purpose of protecting the flow from the Comal and San Marcos springs -- the lifeblood of the Guadalupe River -- by providing San Antonio with a temporary fix to its water problem so that SAWS could pursue other, non-Edwards sources of permanent supplies.

To see SAWS drop not only its participation in the LGWSP but also the Simsboro project is disheartening, since those decisions leave San Antonio without a real solution for the city's future water needs. That means we will see increasing reliance on a series of "band-aid solutions." While it is laudable that SAWS will pursue a desalination plant to clean up brackish groundwater for human consumption, that is the only "new" source of water for which they have a concrete plan. SAWS has, in fact, narrowed their long-term water opportunities from three (including LGWSP and Simsboro) down to only one – the possibility of a deal with LCRA. They are placing all their bets on only one project – and that is a dangerous approach.

Ironically, the LCRA project possesses the same concerns which SAWS expressed about the LGWSP: high cost, substantial use of surface water and groundwater and interbasin transfers. That project undoubtedly will encounter similar opposition as it moves forward.

Yet the question remains: what are SAWS' real intentions regarding the Edwards Aquifer? By joining in the LGWSP in the first place, SAWS was acknowledging its need to reduce its reliance on the

Edwards. Then, earlier this spring and summer, SAWS staff reversed that direction, seeking – in its own draft of SAWS 2005 Water Resource Plan – to buy up as many Edwards water rights as possible. Then, just Monday of this week, the Board reversed the staff recommendation. How "permanent" is that reversal? When will the next flip-flop occur?

The communities all along the Guadalupe still have water needs, and GBRA has the responsibility to meet those needs. The LGWSP was to be an important component of that effort. We will take the rest of this year to consider all other options that will enable us to meet the future water needs within our 10-county statutory district.

Primary for us – as always -- will be the stewardship of the Guadalupe River, including overall stream flow in the river, the spring flows that are so vital to the Guadalupe and the many thousands of people who depend on it, and environmental flows into the bays and estuaries at the mouth of the river.

To that end, we will continue to pursue efforts to fund completion of the environmental studies that have been underway for the past two years. Information on instream flows and bays and estuaries, and the whooping crane, represents vital data that will be needed for a variety of future planning efforts, regardless of any determination regarding the LGWSP.

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