

# Bruce Davidson: Water struggle getting deeper

Web Posted: 10/28/2006 12:00 PM CDT

## San Antonio Express-News

The 2007 legislative session is more than two months away, but intense maneuvering on proposed changes to the law governing the Edwards Aquifer already is under way.

Economic development from San Marcos to the Gulf Coast may hinge on the outcome of the legislative dance over lifting the cap on permitted Edwards pumping during times of plenty and finding an acceptable limit on pumping in critical drought periods.

Stakeholders from downstream and representatives of San Antonio interests have indicated willingness to compromise on the tough issue, but they also emphasized the need for their communities to protect their interests.

The struggle has reached a crucial stage. If lawmakers don't act, the pumping cap during times of plentiful water will drop to 400,000 acre-feet annually at the beginning of 2008. The Edwards Aquifer Authority has issued 549,000 acre-feet of pumping rights under the current law's provisions, although the permit cap is 450,000 acre-feet under the same statute.

That prospect is worrisome to Edwards pumpers, but it is not as much of a concern to communities depending on flows from aquifer-fed springs and rivers. Downstream users are more interested in making sure the pumping cap for critical drought periods is low enough to protect vital stream flows.

Before the specifics of the coming negotiations dominate discussions about the Edwards Aquifer, it is worthwhile to examine why the issue is so important.

San Antonians are accustomed to viewing pumping limits through the prism of the endangered species lawsuit that ushered in the era of the Edwards Aquifer Authority. The species' survival depends on the flow of the Comal and San Marcos springs.

But more important, New Braunfels, San Marcos, Seguin and Victoria depend on the springs for water supply and economic activities.

Seguin, for example, relies on a combination of water from the Guadalupe River, which is fed by the Comal Springs, and groundwater from the Carrizo/Wilcox Aquifer. Important industrial users such as Tyson Foods and Commercial Metals need plenty of water.

Victoria also needs an adequate supply of water from the spring-fed Guadalupe River.

"We don't think a good water supply (in San Antonio) should come at the expense of Victoria," said Bob Keith, a Victoria resident who sits on the South Central Texas Water Advisory Committee.

In other words, spring flows must be maintained to protect San Antonio's neighbors.

Representatives of area cities are expressing concern that San Antonio is overly dependent on the Edwards and not doing enough to move away from that dependence. Their cities have reduced their use of aquifer-fed surface water supplies, and they cite San Antonio's comparatively low water rates as evidence that the city isn't doing enough to wean itself from the aquifer.

The San Antonio Water System's withdrawal from the Lower Guadalupe Water Project and movement to secure more Edwards pumping rights last year fueled further suspicion around the region.

But SAWS is working to reduce its aquifer dependence.

The utility continues to pursue a huge \$1.1 billion project with the Lower Colorado River Authority. It is working on the desalination of brackish groundwater, and the utility pioneered a storage project in the Carrizo Aquifer to save Edwards water for use in a drought.

Additionally, SAWS purchased some Canyon Lake water. SAWS also helped finance a study of recharge and recirculation, which could provide additional Edwards supplies.

The utility's leaders are making a legitimate effort to find another long-term water source.

A full understanding of all stakeholders' situations will go a long way toward productive cooperation to get the region through the trying times ahead.