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Edwards Aquifer Region's Habitat Conservation Plan Designed to Ease Drought Effects

With the onset of traditional hot, dry South Texas weather, water regulators and suppliers have a little extra to focus on this year. This is the fourth year in a row of drought conditions, and the Comal Springs in New Braunfels started showing signs of low flows at the beginning of May. But, due to some innovative environmental programs implemented in 2012 through a regional Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP), the Edwards Aquifer, springflows, endangered species and their habitats have a fighting chance to weather this current drought.

In late 2006, the federal Fish and Wildlife Service brought together stakeholders from throughout the Edwards Region to develop a plan to protect federally listed endangered species dependent on the Edwards Aquifer. The plan was approved in 2012, and program implementation quickly followed.

"This was a long and intense process that regional entities went through to develop what is known as the Habitat Conservation Plan," said HCP program manager Nathan Pence. "Stakeholders developed many different components to help protect the Edwards Aquifer during critical periods. Our overall efforts were designed to strike the right balance in maintaining spring flows, ensuring all water users have the water they need each day and preserving endangered species and their habitats that all rely on Edwards water."

The drought of record occurred over a period of six years in the 1950s when the Edwards Aquifer levels reached all-time lows and the springs in Comal County stopped flowing for about six months. The San Marcos Springs have never gone dry. However, the Edwards Region has five times the population it did in the 1950s, and scientists also know that another drought of record will happen at some point in the future.

While there are many more people living in the eight-county Edwards Aquifer Region, researchers also have learned much more about how to manage the Edwards Aquifer as well. Through the HCP program, water entities are investing nearly $20 million per year in various water-saving and species-habitat preserving programs to help address the difficult weather conditions.

Regional Municipal Water Conservation Program - The goal of the program is to conserve 10,000 acre-feet of permitted or exempt Edwards Aquifer withdrawals. Currently, 8,400 acre-feet of water have been enrolled in the program, with communities such as Uvalde and Universal City participating.

Voluntary Irrigation Suspension Program (VISPO) - The VISPO is a voluntary program open to eligible holders of irrigation water rights from the Edwards Aquifer Authority (EAA) in Atascosa, Bexar, Comal, Hays, Medina and Uvalde counties who are willing to not pump authorized withdrawal rights in exchange for financial payments. More than 24,000 acre-feet of water have been committed to VISPO by the agriculture community.

ASR Leasing Program - The Aquifer Storage and Recovery Leasing Program leases water from Edwards permit holders so it can be stored in San Antonio Water System's Aquifer Storage and Recovery facility in south Bexar County. Edwards water is stored underground for use during extremely dry periods. When stored water is used, SAWS reduces its active pumping from Edwards wells helping to preserve flows at the Comal and San Marcos Springs.

Critical Period Management and Stage V - Under Stage V emergency rules, the Edwards Aquifer permit holders are required to reduce water use from the Edwards by 44 percent. This measure is currently implemented in the Uvalde Pool of the Edwards Aquifer. The San Antonio pool is now in Stage III critical period reductions of 30 percent.

Habitat Protection Measures - There are 10 different habitat protection programs outlined for Comal Springs. Some measures include: aquatic vegetation restoration, decaying vegetation removal, old channel restoration and non-native species animal control. In San Marcos, 16 different environmental plans are being implemented that include: sediment removal, surface water diversions, bank stabilization and native riparian restoration.

"While we can't control the weather, we can control how we prepare for these extremely dry periods, and that's what the HCP is all about," Pence stated. "We know the springs lose flow and water levels across the Edwards Aquifer can drop significantly during prolonged droughts. The good news is that the region has done a very good job of coming together to help us be ready to minimize impacts as much as possible."

HCP

The Edwards Aquifer is a unique groundwater resource, extending 180 miles from Brackettville in Kinney County to Kyle in Hays County. It is the primary source of drinking water for more than 2 million people in south central Texas and serves the domestic, agricultural, industrial and recreational needs of the area. The Edwards Aquifer is the source of the only two major springs remaining in Texas - the San Marcos and the Comal. These springs feed the San Marcos and Comal Rivers which are tributaries to the Guadalupe River.

The Habitat Conservation Plan was developed to protect and preserve this vital water resource. You can read more about the HCP at www.eahcp.org.