Web Posted: 12/11/2008 12:00 CST

Edwards Aquifer drought period pumping limits not settled

Bruce Davidson - Bruce Davidson

The tale of protecting endangered species and limiting the amount of water taken out of the Edwards Aquifer is far from finished.

In fact, next year will bring serious, meaningful discussions about how much pumping should be restricted during critical draught periods.

Debate and decisions will come from the Edwards Aquifer recovery implementation program, or RIP. Such programs, conducted in consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, have been successfully used in other parts of the country to work out sticky water use and endangered species issues, officials noted.

The recovery refers to protection of endangered species threatened by environmental conditions.

The so-called RIP was launched by the same 2007 legislation that raised the pumping cap during normal times from 400,000 acre-feet to 572,000 acre-feet.

As part of the agreement to increase the pumping cap, lawmakers required the RIP to be conducted and that it be completed by the end of 2012.

The RIP meetings have included about 70 stakeholder representatives from across the Edwards region and set up the procedures for the discussion that follows.

An expert science subcommittee's work is set to be completed this year.

By the end of next year, recommendations for withdrawal limits during critical management periods are expected.

“By the end of next year, we're going to have a very good scientific understanding as to what the species need,” said Robert Gulley, program manager for the recovery implementation effort.

The species were at the heart of a 1991 federal lawsuit that forced the region to start moving toward controling Edwards Aquifer use because of the threats to endangered species in aquifer-fed streams.

Since then, the impact of pumping on communities and the economy downstream has been more fully acknowledged.

“If you don't solve the problem regionally, the federal judge will come in and solve it," said Gulley.

Having a recovery plan approved by U.S. Fish and Wildlife, which is the goal of the process, will help pumpers defend their actions against future litigation.

“This is critically important to the region,” said Weir Labatt, a member of the Texas Water development board and participant in the RIP.

The group will not prejudge solutions, but is developing the best science possible, he said.

Of course, among the possible solutions are severe pumping restrictions during dry times, which could have a major impact on San Antonio and other aquifer users.

Despite the fact that RIP participants are not speculating on the recommendations, it makes sense for the San Antonio Water System and other major Edwards Aquifer consumers to stay serious about alternative sources.

The region's water users have undergone a lot of changes, including the pumping caps and pumping permits.

But the truth is we have not yet come to terms with the difficult and painful consequences of severe drought that threatens the protected species.

SAWS has worked hard and made progress in supplementing the Edwards, but the job is far from complete and big-ticket projects are on the horizon.

Few issues rival water supply in importance when it comes to ensuring a vibrant future for the region.

The RIP will start making headlines when the hard choices get put on the table next year.

Whatever the specifces, the consequences will be big. San Antonio can't afford to stop investing in alternatives to the Edwards Aquifer for the future.