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Finally, proposals on aquifer's water quality, but disaster lurks

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There is a reason for the animosity about San Antonio -- which some call the Great Colossus -- that is building from Del Rio to the Gulf Coast: water. San Antonians may be among the nation's most prudent water users, but being the region's largest city, the Alamo City is the area's undisputed water hog. And the city-owned San Antonio Water System has limitless resources to hire lobbyists and lawyers to smash any little hamlet or group that dares challenge our city's quest for more water.

Can you blame folks outside of here if they quake because our city -- unlike most of theirs -- remains almost entirely dependent on the Edwards Aquifer, as San Antonio continues its ever-widening concentric growth? Is it any wonder that they fear that we will suck the life-giving liquid out from under them -- or poison it?

When an e-mail from the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance arrived, alerting its 40 member groups to attend a series of public hearings by the Edwards Aquifer Authority, I was surprised that the hearings are over proposed rules for protecting the aquifer's water quality.

The EAA was created in 1993 to regulate how much water could be pumped out of the aquifer and how Edwards water users would deal with droughts.

The agency was also empowered to set rules for protecting the quality of the aquifer's water. But until now, it has done precious little in that regard.

Legal challenges prevented the EAA from doing much until 1996, "and in that first decade (that followed), so much of the time was taken up establishing the permit system" that limits pumping, says EAA spokesman Roland Ruiz. "Since the last legislative session, most of those issues have been settled, so the (EAA) board has been moving the focus and including water quality into its purview.

"We're looking at other issues that impact the aquifer as much as the quantity issue," he adds, conceding that the Helotes mulch fire served to focus attention on water quality issues.

The first hearing was held Monday in New Braunfels. Four more hearings will be held in San Marcos, Uvalde, Hondo and San Antonio to hear from residents and others about EAA rules that are finally being proposed to regulate water quality.

Since the Edwards filters virtually nothing out of the rainfall that washes into the porous limestone, one would think that any water quality rules would address permitted land uses.

The proposed rules, however, do not prohibit potentially disastrous pollutants from being placed atop the Edwards' recharge or contributing zones.

"The rules would place reporting requirements in the event of any kind of spills of hazardous or petroleum products over the recharge zones," Ruiz says. "They would have to report these within 72 hours.

"Other issues include that facilities that regularly store 10,000 pounds or 1,000 gallons of a regulated substance would have to register and comply with certain storage standards, and they would have to have, on file, a spill prevention and response plan."

In short, potential polluters would have to register, and limit the amount of contaminants they would store in facilities with minimum standards. And if the poisons spill, they would have to report it within three days and they would have to have a plan filed to clean it up.

How very reassuring.

"The city of San Antonio has prohibited certain uses (for land) over the recharge zone," says Annalisa Peace, GEAA's executive director. "Certain types of businesses are prohibited. The EAA's rules do not do that, they just have conditions.

"Chlorinated solvents, especially, could be deadly to the Edwards because they're all but impossible to clean up," she adds, pointing out that already, two Edwards sites have been polluted with the nasty stuff.

Still, she says, something is better than nothing, but only if the rules are a start.

"These rules are good," she says. "But they should go ahead and prohibit certain uses."

And ban certain poisons.

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