

Protect quality of Edwards Aquifer water

ANNALISA PEACE, FOR THE EXPRESS-NEWS : APRIL 19, 2013 : Updated: April 19, 2013 4:35pm

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The Edwards Aquifer Habitat Conservation Plan — or HCP, which is managed by the **Edwards Aquifer Authority** in partnership with the cities

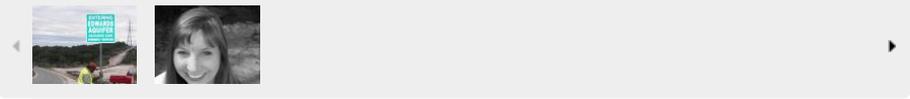
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Officials in the Edwards Aquifer region are making progress protecting water quantity, but not water quality.



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New Braunfels, San Marcos and San Antonio; the **Guadalupe Blanco River Authority**; **Texas State**

University; Texas Parks and Wildlife; and the **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service** — has made progress in promoting water conservation in the Edwards region, improving habitat for the endangered species and restricting water use to preserve flows at the Comal and San Marcos springs.

I take this opportunity to raise an issue with management of the springs that seems to be as yet unaddressed by the implementation of the HCP — that of preserving water quality.

The **Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance**, or GEAA, monitors developments within the Edwards Aquifer Recharge and Contributing zones. We are concerned about development and land-use patterns within this region and their potential impact on water quality.

In 2009, GEAA requested funding from the Edwards Aquifer Recovery Implementation Program, or EARIP, for dye tracing studies needed to predict impacts of land use on spring flows at the Comal and San Marcos springs. Such studies are needed to identify land areas that communicate surface storm water runoff, and subsurface contaminants such as sewage, that could be communicated directly to the springs. Funding for these studies was not granted; the impact of human activity on water quality is a component of the HCP that has been largely ignored.

A subcommittee report submitted to the EARIP in 2010 strongly recommended, "All entities regulating any aspect of development over the portions of the recharge zone of the Edwards Aquifer ... are strongly urged to implement, consistent with their authority, responsible limits on impervious cover. High levels of impervious cover result in degradation of water quality in surface water and in groundwater. Accordingly, the EARIP should approach these entities at the earliest opportunity to explore their willingness to consider taking these actions and to encourage them to do so."

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Land that may provide water directly to the springs is being developed at a rapid pace. Several high-density projects with the potential to pollute the springs are moving forward, including Wortham Oaks in Bexar County, Crescent Hills in Comal County, and the Veramendi project directly above Comal Springs in New Braunfels.

San Marcos also has many very large developments underway located on the riverbanks or in the Recharge Zone, as well as in the watershed of Spring Lake and the head of the San Marcos River. One major sewage spill from any of these residential developments might result in closing down the springs. Barton Springs has been closed to the public a number of times since the 1980s due to unsafe levels of fecal coli form bacteria in its waters. Contaminants can travel very quickly within the Edwards.

EAA staff recently reported extremely elevated levels of fecal coli form bacteria in water wells as far as four miles away from the site of a sewage spill that occurred on the recharge zone on Oct. 15.

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San Antonio has good water quality ordinances governing the affected area, but rarely enforces them, instead granting vested rights, which exempts new developments from complying. San Marcos is not enforcing its water quality rules and erosion control ordinances.

Residents of San Antonio, New Braunfels and San Marcos should communicate these concerns to their mayors and city council representatives. A component of the HCP to address water quality issues should be implemented immediately.

At risk are not only the endangered species protected, but also a vibrant recreational economy that relies on clean water flowing from the springs in New Braunfels and San Marcos.

Annalisa Peace is executive director of the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance.