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Edwards Aquifer Authority seeks to raise fees for permit holders

The agency, which manages San Antonio's largest water source, says it needs to raise fees by 8% to save up for new expenses.

By **Liz Teitz**, Staff Writer

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Gift Article



Edwards Aquifer Authority staffers assess a spring at the Dischinger-Brehmer Ranch in Comal County in this file photo. The aquifer authority is planning to raise the fees it charges to permit holders by almost 8% in 2026.

Josie Norris/San Antonio Express-News



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The agency that manages the Edwards Aquifer, San Antonio's largest water source, is looking to raise fees on users by almost 8% next year to increase its reserves for future needs.



The Edwards Aquifer Authority charges aquifer management fees to all permit holders who pump from the groundwater system. That includes utilities such as the San Antonio Water System, which pumps more water from the aquifer than any other user.

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The aquifer is a limestone formation that holds water underground, and provides water for more than 2 million people. The Edwards Aquifer Authority oversees pumping from the system in eight counties.

Municipal and industrial customers could see those management fees climb from \$90 per acre-foot to \$97 in 2026, under the authority's proposed budget.

An acre-foot is the amount of water needed to cover 1 acre in 1 foot of water, and is a commonly used metric in the water industry. One acre-foot is about 326,000 gallons.

If approved, this would be the third consecutive increase after the fee was raised from \$84 to \$88 in 2024 and then to \$90 in 2025.

The fees are charged to those who pump directly from the aquifer: businesses, utilities, cities and private well owners. For customers who get their water from those utilities, the costs can ultimately affect the price they pay for water.

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Agricultural permit holders pay a management fee of \$2 per acre-foot; that amount is set by state statute and will not be affected by the proposed changes.

The municipal and industrial management fees provide about 96% of the aquifer authority's revenue, Shelly Hendrix, the authority's senior director and controller of financial services, told the board of directors last week. The \$7 increase would generate about \$2.4 million, she said.

The fee is made up of two components: a general fund fee and one specific to the Edwards Aquifer Habitat Conservation Plan. The current proposal would reduce the conservation plan fee by \$5 but increase the general fund's by \$12, resulting in the overall increase of \$7.

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That's part of an effort to increase money available in the general fund that isn't restricted, General Manager Roland Ruiz said.

"We're trying to build reserve capacity in the budget as we look to the future and next habitat conservation plan," he said.

The plan is part of the authority's federal incidental take permit, which requires protections for endangered species that live in the aquifer's springs. In order to pump from the aquifer, which could result in an accidental "take," or harm to those species, the aquifer authority must have a plan that includes mitigation and protection efforts.

The most expensive components of the conservation plan are two programs that pay permit holders who agree to not use their water during certain drought conditions. Both are intended to reduce pumping when groundwater levels fall, which helps maintain flows at the San Marcos and Comal Springs, home to protected species including the fountain darter and the Texas blind salamander.

Other participants in the plan are SAWS, the cities of San Marcos and New Braunfels and Texas State University, which all have permits for Edwards water.

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The current plan and permit was approved in 2013 and will expire in March 2028. The aquifer authority is working on a new plan to submit to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for approval in 2027.

That new plan will bring "some unknown expenditures," Hendrix told the board, and the agency wants to build up its reserves to prepare for that.

But it also wants that money to be available in its general fund, instead of explicitly tied to the conservation plan, so it can be used elsewhere if needed.

"Let's build up a healthy enough reserve in the general fund, knowing we can allocate a portion of that to the habitat conservation plan, but we don't need to limit ourselves," Ruiz said.

According to the proposed budget, the authority's general fund reserves are estimated to reach about \$17 million and the end of 2026, while the habitat conservation plan reserve would be just under \$4 million.

Ruiz also said the authority kept the fee unchanged for more than a decade, and now needs to raise it to make up for that time and keep up with inflation.

He said he doesn't yet know how much more the fee will climb in the coming years, as the plan is still under development.

"I don't have that sort of forecast model to say how much will be enough," Ruiz said.

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As the largest permit holder for Edwards water, SAWS also pays the biggest share of those management fees. The city-owned utility has rights to more than 251,000 acre-feet of Edwards water for 2025, and must pay the fee for that full amount, no matter how much it ultimately uses.

The total permitted amount of annual pumping from the aquifer is 572,000 acre-feet.

SAWS passes the aquifer authority's fees on to its customers with an [“EAA Pass Through Fee”](#) on water bills. In 2025, that rate was about 34 cents per 1,000 gallons.

The utility's average single-family customers use about 5,000 to 8,000 gallons per month, depending on the season; the current pass-through fee would cost them about \$1.71 to \$2.74 per month.

SAWS officials declined to comment on the proposed fee increase. The utility is also preparing to seek its own rate hike from City Council in 2026 to pay for major capital projects, including wastewater plant upgrades and water main repairs.

The aquifer authority is expected to hold a public hearing on the proposed budget and fees on Oct. 15, and to vote on adopting the budget on Nov. 12.

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Liz Teitz
REPORTER



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Liz joined the Express-News in June 2023. She has been a reporter for eight years, covering housing, government, education and other topics for the Ouray County Plaindealer, Hearst Connecticut Media Group and the Beaumont Enterprise. Liz grew up in Rhode Island and graduated from Georgetown University.

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