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Rain does little to soothe S.A.'s drought

Edwards Aquifer Authority could still find itself implementing limits

By Elena Bruess

The San Antonio area last month got nearly double the amount of rainfall it does during a typical April — but all that water had only a small impact on the region's ongoing drought.

Thanks to a series of thunderstorms in the last third of the month, San Antonio got 4.75 inches of rain in April, according to the National Weather Service. That's well above the typical April average of 2.42 inches. Just between April 20-30, gauges at San Antonio International Airport record 2.9 inches of rain.

"We actually got more rainfall in the 11-day period of Fiesta than we typically see for the whole month," Brandon Gale, a National Weather Service metrologist based in New Braunfels, told the Express-News.

San Marcos also saw 5.63 inches of rain during April, according to the National Weather Service.

However, despite those higher-than-normal rainfall totals, the region remains in the grip of drought. The U.S. Drought Monitor currently lists much of the San Antonio region as in severe or extreme drought. From January to March this year, the Edwards Aquifer's water levels reached their lowest levels since the record drought of the 1950s. Over 2 million people depend on water from the Edwards Aquifer, a porous limestone cavern system spanning hundreds of feet underground and across 3,600 square miles. The aquifer provides the San Antonio Water System with just over 50 percent of its water supply.

"One of the issues here is that April was the first time in a very long time when we had at least average or above average rainfall for a month," said Paul Bertetti, senior director of aquifer science research and modeling at the Edward Aquifer Authority, the agency that manages the aquifer. "If we keep getting average rainfall, then I think the projections... are going to still be valid. And that was we're going to be in some sort of Stage 3 for most of the year."

The Edwards Aquifer Authority is currently in Stage 3 water restrictions, which are implemented when the 10-day running average of the water level drops below 640 feet.

The Edwards Aquifer Authority said in April that it could find itself implementing Stage 4 water restrictions earlier this year than any time in its history. As of April 9, the aquifer level was at 635 feet. When the rolling average drops below 630 feet, it triggers the authority to call for Stage 4 water restrictions for suppliers who draw from the aquifer. Those restrictions mean reducing pumping by 40 percent from normal levels — a major cutback for some Hill Country communities, many of whom get all their water from the aquifer.

Drought continues on A4

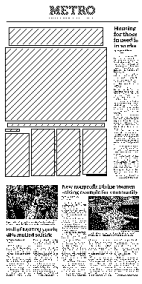
The recent rain has helped a bit, and the aquifer's water level had risen to about 641 feet as of Tuesday, according to the agency's tracking website. Historically, when the region slowly transitions from the global climate phenomenon La Nina, which causes drier and hotter weather, to El Nino, which causes wetter and colder weather, there can be larger than average rainfall events. While it's anecdotal, Bertetti said, San Antonio could get lucky this year.

However, the Edwards Aquifer will most likely drop back to the 630s this week. It still remains well below the historical monthly average of 665 feet for May, according to the agency's website – meaning a lot more rain would be needed to return things to normal. This, on top of the increased summertime pumping in San Antonio, will make it difficult to see much difference in the drought.

From January to March, San Antonio recorded 3.17 inches of rain, about half the typical average of 6 inches during those months.

Gale, the National Weather Service meteorologist, also said San Antonio has only received 15.83 inches since last April – about half 32.38 inches it would typically receive during that 12-month period.

Last year, San Antonio was 20 inches below normal precipitation — meaning it will take a lot of rainfall to bounce back from the drought and the Ed-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wards Aquifer region should expect drought restrictions for the entire year. It also means the rivers, creeks and lakes continue to struggle with low water flows.

In order for the Edwards Aquifer to come close to returning its water level to historical norms, there would need to be consistent above-average rainfall over the Edwards Aquifer Recharge Zone, Bertetti said. The Edwards Aquifer Recharge Zone is a roughly 1,200 square mile swath of land stretching from Kinney County up to Williamson County in which the structure of the Edwards limestone formations allow large quantities of water to flow into the aquifer.

"The recharge zone is in an area that got relatively small amounts of rainfall given the total amount in the region," Bertetti said. "We need good rainfall in the right area for a longer period of time."

Staff writer Eric Killelea contributed to this report.

William Luther/Staff photographer

Despite April showers, San Antonio and much of the area remains gripped by drought. Rain averages this year have been well above the typical April average of 2.42 inches with a nearly 5 inch estimate.

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William Luther/Staff photographer

The Edwards Aquifer Authority said it may still have to implement restrictions for supplies drawing from the well.

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