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San Antonio area's drought might have eased, but it's not over

Heavy rains in the spring and summer improved levels in area aquifers, lakes and streams, but we're still not fully recovered from years below-normal rainfall.



Clint Carter, watershed ecologist for the Bandera County River Authority and Groundwater District, examines the flowing Medina River from the Schmidtke Road bridge Wednesday, Aug. 5, 2026, in Bandera, Texas.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

By **Liz Teitz**, Staff Writer

Aug 23, 2026

 Gift Article





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San Antonio area's drought might have eased, but it's not over

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BANDERA COUNTY — Crystal-clear water splashed over the limestone bed of the Medina River as it ran beneath the Schmidtke Road bridge near Bandera.





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It was music to Clint Carter's ears.

“That’s not something we’re really used to hearing these days,” said Carter, who keeps a close eye on the river as a watershed ecologist for the Bandera County River Authority and Groundwater District. “The river is singing again.”

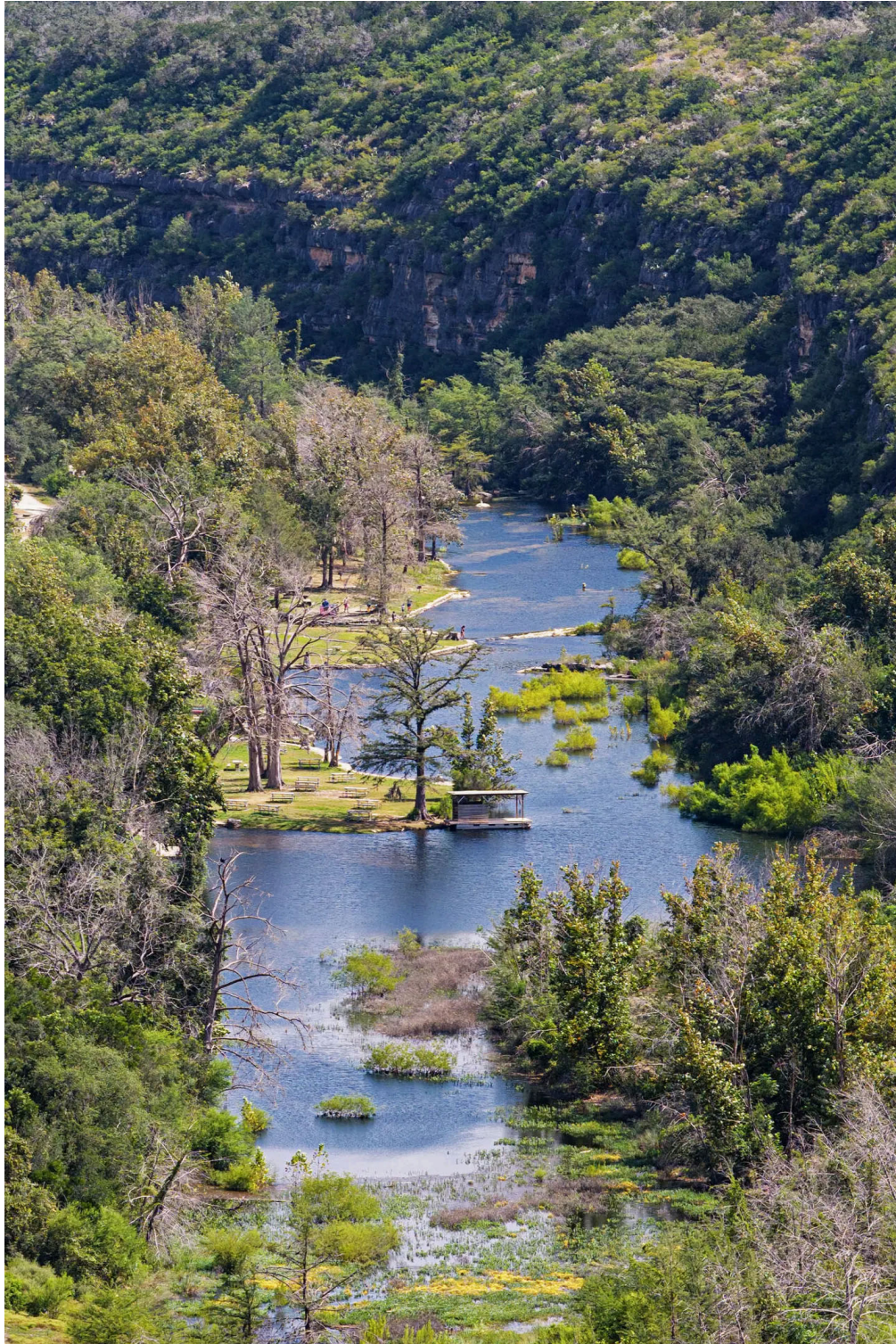
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It's a welcome sound in the Hill Country, but it doesn't mean the drought that has gripped the region for years is over. Water levels remain low in aquifers and some reservoirs and rivers, and recent rains haven't made up for a shortfall that has strained water supplies.

It will take more rainfall, in the right place and time, to fully recover.

"But for the first time in a long time, we're headed in the right direction," Carter said.



The Medina River flows south of Medina Lake Dam on Tuesday, Aug. 11, 2026, in Medina County, Texas.

'Still not out of it'

Rainfall in San Antonio has been below average for six of the last seven years since 2019.

Annual rainfall in San Antonio

San Antonio has received below-average precipitation for six of the last seven years, but so far in 2026, rainfall has trended above-average.

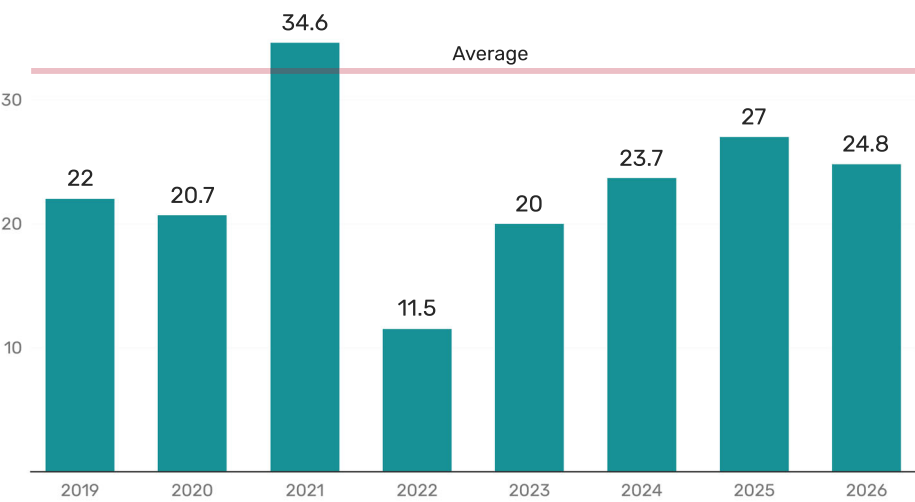


Chart: Liz Teitz • Source: [National Weather Service](#)

If the region's water supplies were bank accounts, their balance would be dwindling. People, businesses and institutions use water faster than rain has been able to replenish it, drawing down the balance. Each year without enough rain means that even more is needed to catch up to normal — so it takes more than one or two big storms to recover.

At the start of 2026, Canyon Lake was less than two-thirds full, and Medina Lake, west of San Antonio, was even more dire at less than 5% of its capacity. The Medina, Guadalupe and other rivers were flowing at rates far below normal.

The Edwards Aquifer, which provides water for more than 2 million people, has been limiting water use since March 2022. Its key San Antonio monitoring site, the J-17 well, which sits below a water tower at Fort Sam Houston, started 2026 with its third-lowest New Year’s Day measurement in nearly a century of record-keeping.

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By the Edwards Aquifer Authority's definition, the region is in drought if the level of water in J-17 is below 660 feet for more than 90 days, said Paul Bertetti, senior director of aquifer science research and modeling for the agency. The well has been below that level for more than 1,600 days. That's more than 4 years.

While it's normal to dip below 660 and into restrictions for a brief period, typically in the late summer and fall, "it's unusual that we would stay there for more than a couple of months," he said.

This past spring brought signs of recovery. More rain than usual fell in April, May and June, including some to the north and west of San Antonio, over areas where water can enter the Edwards Aquifer and refill it.

In mid-July, storms parked over the Hill Country, dropping 10 to 20 inches of rain from Uvalde County to San Antonio. That caused flooding across the region and sent rivers over their banks, including the Nueces, Frio and Sabinal — all of which help recharge the Edwards Aquifer.

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The aquifer's water level climbed about 27 feet from early April to late July, reaching almost 652 feet at the J-17 well. That's a major increase, but it's still below the threshold for drought restrictions. It's already started dropping again and is down to about 643 feet, which is more than 13 feet below the historical average for August.

"Is the drought over? I would say things have really improved," Bertetti said. "But if we go by our definition, we're still not out of it."

READ MORE: [SAWS eases drought restrictions, drops extra charge on higher users](#)

Improvement, but not full recovery

That's the story for much of the region.

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In July, the Bandera County River Authority and Groundwater District moved from “severe” to “moderate” drought conditions, but General Manager Dave Mauk isn’t declaring victory.

“If we don’t get any more rain, we’ll be right back in it,” he said. Groundwater levels have remained low since 2011, and locally, the drought could “very well go down as the drought of record,” he said — the worst of the worst.

Many of the county’s wells are in the lower and middle parts of the Trinity Aquifer, which recharge more slowly than the Edwards Aquifer and benefit less from rainfall and water on the surface.

Still, there are signs of recovery. In areas where the Medina River had slowed to a trickle or simply stopped flowing in recent years, cool, clear water is now running.

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On the left, John McCarthy walks upstream on a dry Medina River bed in 2024. Bottom left, Clint Carter looks downstream on the same stretch of the Medina River in 2026, where water has returned thanks to rainfall in July. Right, a mostly dry Medina River in 2024, top, and again in 2026, bottom, where water is now flowing swiftly over the river's bedrock. File (top) and Sam Owens (bottom)/San Antonio Express-News

File and Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

The river reached major flood stage during the mid-July rain, and while it has slowed somewhat in recent weeks, flow remains well above average.

"We received close to 14 inches over a three-day period, and the watershed responded very, very well," Carter said.

Water chemistry tests indicate that spring water is flowing downstream on the Medina, not just rainfall and runoff, he said. That's a sign of higher groundwater levels.

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Higher river flows have brought relief to the long-suffering Medina Lake downstream. Rainfall this spring brought the lake up to about 10% full, then July's storms pushed it to nearly 30%, the highest level since September 2021.

But as paddlers and swimmers have returned to the river, the looming question is how long it will last.

"Right now, we're trying to enjoy what we have and we're so thankful, but in the back of our minds, we know this isn't perpetual," Carter said.

The Guadalupe River, which also reached major flood stage last month, has stayed above average as well, running faster than normal from Kerrville to Canyon Lake.

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considered rain.

In Kendall County, "we're seeing recharge right now, which we haven't seen in the last three years," said Micah Voulgaris, general manager of the Cow Creek Groundwater Conservation District, which manages groundwater there.

The Guadalupe River and Cibolo Creek are both still above normal in the county, a good sign for the aquifers that both receive water from the rivers and provide spring flows to keep them going.

But, once again, that doesn't mean the drought is over. Voulgaris said the district's monitor wells are still, on average, about 25 feet below 2008, which it considers its "baseline" level.

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Clockwise from left, private docks line an inlet of Medina Lake, Medina lake dam and Red Cove Marina as seen on Tuesday, Aug. 11, 2026, in Mico, Texas. Although the area remains in drought, spring rainfall raised the lake to about 10% of capacity before July storms pushed it to nearly 30%, its highest level since September 2021.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

Water restrictions

Outdoor watering restrictions around the region have eased in recent weeks, but only slightly, and not everywhere. With no guarantee of more rain, conservation is still needed to stave off further declines.

Both the Edwards Aquifer Authority and the Cow Creek district were requiring 30% cuts to pumping earlier this summer. Cow Creek has relaxed that to 20% because of the improved conditions. The aquifer authority briefly did too, but reinstated those cuts after the J-17 well started falling again.

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Water utilities that serve homes and businesses in most area cities set their own rules for their customers.

The city of Boerne, for example, has limited outdoor watering to once a week since August 2023. That hasn't changed even though two of the city's main water sources, Boerne City Lake and Canyon Lake, are now full.

The Edwards Aquifer's rise prompted the San Antonio Water System to move from Stage 3 to Stage 2 for the first time in two years, dropping a high-use surcharge that applies only in more severe drought conditions. But officials are still urging conservation and lawn-watering restrictions remain in place.

"The story today is one of recovery, although recent hot and dry conditions are beginning to slow the process," SAWS water resources manager Steven Siebert told the utility's board this month.

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"It is important to remember that August and September are typically among the hottest months of the year, and continued precipitation during the remainder of the summer and into the fall will be important to sustain these gains and further improve regional water conditions," he said.



The Bandera County River Authority and Groundwater District displays a sign indicating moderate drought conditions Wednesday, Aug. 5, 2026, outside its office in Bandera, Texas.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

READ MORE: [El Niño continues to get stronger. Here's how it could change Texas weather.](#)

Still need more rain

The bottom line, experts say, is that the area needs even more rainfall to fully escape the years-long drought and stave off deeper cuts that would come if water levels fall again.

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Full recovery, if it happens, isn't likely until later in the year, when temperatures drop, lowering evaporation and reducing demand on water supplies. While this summer has been cooler than usual, with fewer 100-degree days, Texas summer still strains supplies.

"This is not the time of year that you bust a drought," said Mark Wentzel, a hydrologist for the Texas Water Development Board, the state's water planning agency. "It's going to take a good fall, winter and spring for Central Texas and South Texas to be out of drought."

A strong, potentially "super" El Niño is forecast and could provide that relief. Temperature changes in the Pacific Ocean shift the jet stream to the south, which typically brings more moisture into Texas, he said. That typically means fall and winter are cooler and wetter in Texas.

That would be particularly helpful for the Edwards because pumping from the aquifer tends to decline in October and November when people — both farmers and homeowners — aren't watering as much.

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In order to "refill the tank" and get out of pumping restrictions, "we need some sort of above-average, steady rainfall during a time when we're not pumping very much," Bertetti said.

Voulgaris is likewise optimistic about what the fall and winter could bring, but said it's going to take recurring rainfall, not just a few storms.

"We need to get into a good El Niño pattern where we see some soaking rains," he said.

While drought and flood aren't unprecedented in Central Texas, climate projections suggest the future may look more and more like the last few years, with drought interrupted by big downpours likely to continue.

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“What we see is much more propensity toward really big spikes in rainfall, and then propensity toward these recurrent droughts,” Bertetti said.



Water flows in the Medina River near County Road 2615 on Tuesday, Aug. 11, 2026, in Medina County, Texas.
Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News



Clint Carter, watershed ecologist for the Bandera County River Authority and Groundwater District, dips his hands into the flowing Medina River near the English Crossing Road bridge Wednesday, Aug. 5, 2026, in Pipe Creek, Texas.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

Those projections call for hotter weather. A 2024 report by state climatologist John Nielsen-Gammon found that the number of 100-degree days in Texas each year is expected to quadruple by 2036 compared to the 1970s and 1980s.

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Higher temperatures rob soil of its moisture, causing longer and more intense droughts, but they also contribute to more rainfall, as warming over oceans causes more evaporation, putting more water into the atmosphere that eventually falls in bigger storms.

The biggest stories of the last two years — drought and flood — are consistent with long-term models, Bertetti said.

If that plays out, “we should get used to aquifer levels generally being lower, and then we get some infrequent rainfall events and hope that they’re in the right place to really have an impact on raising the aquifer levels,” he said. “That may be kind of our new norm.”

Aug 23, 2026



Liz Teitz
REPORTER



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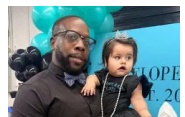
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