

Area water restrictions may be on way soon

By Elena Bruess

STAFF WRITER

San Antonio and surrounding areas could implement Stage 1 water restrictions this week.

After an unusually rainy summer, Bexar County is back to its typical hot, dry self, and the Edwards Aquifer is feeling the impact. The aquifer level has averaged 660.1 feet over the last 10 days with a high of 660.2 feet on Monday. If the level drops to 659 feet or less this week, the rolling 10-day average could plunge below 660 feet and trigger Stage 1 restrictions, according to the San Antonio Water System.

San Antonio saw Stage 2 water restrictions implemented in April, but all watering limitations ended in May as what was expected to be a dry summer turned wet. The aquifer's level hovered around 665 feet for most of June and July, sparing Bexar County residents from the usual mandated water conservation measures.

But more recently, reduced precipitation in August has decreased the water levels over the Edwards Aquifer recharge zone. While some rain this last weekend and more in the forecast may be helpful, SAWS said, if drier weather overall persists in the coming week, San Antonio will do what it has historically done to conserve its major water source.

Likewise, New Braunfels Utilities issued an advisory to the media on Friday saying that the aquifer's level was approaching the trigger point for Stage 1.

What does Stage 1 mean?

San Antonio has year-round watering rules, and in the case of drought, the city implements stricter guidelines. There are four stages of water restrictions, with the least limiting – Stage 1 – imposed when the aquifer level falls below 660 feet.

Stage 1 water restrictions in San

Antonio involve limitations on watering lawns, reducing water consumption and a prohibition on washing impervious cover. When implemented, residents are assigned days – based on the last number of their street address – on which they can water their lawns with sprinklers, irrigation systems or soaker hoses. For example, people with addresses that end in 0 or 1 can only do so on Mondays and only before 11 a.m. or after 7 p.m. Tuesday is for addresses ending in 2 or 3; Wednesday, 4 or 5; Thursday, 6 or 7; and Friday, 8 or 9.

Watering lawns by hand is permitted at any time and on any day.

More details on Stage 1 watering restrictions are on SAWS' website.

Water waste and washing impervious cover – such as driveways, parking lots or sidewalks – are prohibited. Other examples of wasting water include runoff that pools into drains, gutters or ditches, or water leaks that are not repaired. Residents may wash their cars once per week on Saturday or Sunday, and only if they allow no water waste.

SAWS urges all San Antonians to reduce water consumption by any means possible, such as taking shorter showers, not letting faucets run and other water saving tips.

Citations may be issued to residents who do not follow the current regulations by police officers who work part time for SAWS, said Karen Guz, director of water conservation for SAWS. But during the beginnings of Stages 1 and 2, SAWS will educate the public foremost and issue alerts to people not following the guidelines.

In most instances, residents forget or don't understand the rules. But in some cases, repeat offenders could receive citations.

Once the Edwards Aquifer drops below 660 feet, SAWS will

track the level for two weeks to see if it starts to rise, Guz said.

"Even if it stays above that entire time, we're still not done," she said. "We're going to look at the forecast and the conditions and how close we are to the 660 trigger. If it looks like we're going to pop right back under in two days, the city manager, advised by us, will keep to Stage 1."

Why 660 feet?

Edwards Aquifer pumping restrictions have much to do with the blind salamander and six other endangered species.

"The goal of all the water restrictions that we have is to maintain adequate spring flow at San Marcos Springs and Comal Springs so that the endangered and protected species at the springs can survive and thrive," said Paul Bertetti, director of aquifer science at the Edwards Aquifer Authority.

Low levels in the Edwards Aquifer can lead to decreased flow in nearby springs. And without the regular spring flow, the habitat for small creatures like the riffle beetle and the fountain darter is threatened. Because of this, the aquifer's level serves as an alert for San Antonio that it's time to slow the pumps.

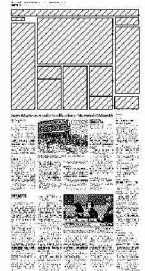
"660 feet is early enough so that we can make a series of corrections to keep that flow going," Bertetti said. "But it's not so high that we're always in some sort of critical period."

Springs like Comal and San Marcos won't completely dry up until the aquifer reaches a much lower level, around 615 feet or less.

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Marvin Pfeiffer / Staff photographer

Watering lawns using sprinklers would be limited to one day per week if Stage 1 restrictions are implemented in San Antonio.