

# Drought may stiffen water restrictions

Stage 4 could kick in as Edwards Aquifer levels drop, authority says

By Elena Bruess

STAFF WRITER

Without substantial rain, the Edwards Aquifer area is heading toward Stage 4 water restrictions in mid-to-late August, according to the Edwards Aquifer Authority.

The aquifer's level is 631.67 feet, having dropped drastically this year. It fell just over 4 feet during the past 10 days, with the rolling average now of 635.2 feet. When the rolling average drops below 630 feet, it will trigger the Aquifer Authority to call for Stage 4 water restrictions for water suppliers who tap the Edwards Aquifer.

"It's likely that we might have lower-than-expected rainfall for the vast majority of Texas over the next month," said Paul Bertetti, senior director of aquifer science research and modeling at the Aquifer Authority. "So we should not expect some significant or above-average rainfall to get us out of this current drought condition, at least over the next month."

Historically, the aquifer's average level this time of year is 660.6 feet; at this time last year, it was 670.6 feet. The authority's main reference point for measuring the Edwards Aquifer's level is at the J-17 index well on Joint Base San Antonio-Fort Sam Houston.

There is a 50 percent chance the level at J-17 will dip below 630 feet for part of August and then rise to 640 feet by December, Bertetti said. And there is a 25 percent chance that the aquifer will stay at 630 feet beyond October.

At Comal Springs, which depends on the Edwards Aquifer for its water, the flow rate is 128 cubic feet per second as of July 11. Last year, the flow rate was 30 cfs higher than it is now.

Even so, Edwards Aquifer Authority General Manager Roland Ruiz said the aquifer is much better off than it was even 25 years ago, as regulations and restrictions have spurred better management.

"We have this critical period of management and pumping withdrawal restrictions that essentially curtails, sort of reduces, the rate of decline of the aquifer during these critical periods of drought," Bertetti said. "So ... instead of having a slope in which you end up at water levels in which the springs might stop flowing, you managed to start reducing the decline of the aquifer system and lessen demand."

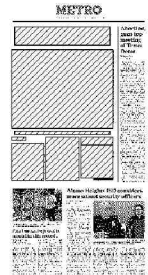
The Aquifer Authority heightening water restrictions to Stage 4 does not necessarily mean that the San Antonio Water System will do likewise. Currently, SAWS has advised the city to continue Stage 2 restrictions and to begin using water from other sources, such as the Vista Ridge **Aquifer continues on A5** Pipeline and the Aquifer Storage and Recovery Site.

"We are very comfortable with the water resources that we have," said Gavino Ramos, vice president of communications and external affairs at SAWS. "We don't foresee ourselves going into Stage 3 restrictions."

San Antonio residents are still required to limit watering lawns using sprinklers, irrigation systems and soaker hoses to once a week based on the last number of their address.

Such watering is allowed from 7 a.m. to 11 a.m. and 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. on a resident's designated day. Any changes to watering restrictions will come directly from the city or SAWS, rather than the Aquifer Authority.

San Antonio has never resorted to Stage 3 restric-



tions, let alone Stage 4. “SAWS find themselves in quite a different position than other communities, smaller communities — to the west, for example — that are wholly dependent on the Edwards,” Ruiz said. “They generally prepare for droughts by having more Edwards water inventory within their water permit than they

need at times, but I’m sure they’ll be stressed this summer.”

*Elena Bruess writes for the Express-News through Report for America, a national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms. ReportforAmerica.org. elena.bruess@express-news.net*



Jerry Lara / Staff photographer

**Centro ambassador Roman Woodman makes his rounds along San Pedro Creek Culture Park. The Edwards Aquifer Authority said Wednesday that without substantial rains, the area is headed toward Stage 4 water restrictions in August.**



William Luther/Staff file photo

**A sinkhole two hours west of San Antonio is one of the largest single recharge features for the aquifer, which is 38 feet lower than it was at this time in 2021.**