

## Rains ease pumping restrictions to Stage 3

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The Edwards Aquifer Authority eased pumping restrictions Thursday, as recent rains have lifted the water levels in the groundwater system that much of Central Texas relies on.

The authority, which manages the aquifer, said it is moving from Stage 4 restrictions to Stage 3. That allows aquifer users to pump up to 65% of their permitted amount of water. The limit was 60% under Stage 4 rules, which have been in place since late July.

The Edwards Aquifer, a limestone cavern system that spans more than 3,000 miles, provides water for more than 2 million people, including about half of the San Antonio Water System's supply.

Although it's a positive sign for the Edwards Aquifer as a whole, the easing of restrictions won't have much of an effect on customers of San Antonio Water System. The city-owned water utility gets about half its water from other sources, so it is less reliant on the Edwards Aquifer and can meet the authority's pumping restrictions without further limits on its customers. SAWS remained in Stage 2 restrictions even when the aquifer authority previously went to Stage 3 and Stage 4.

Customers of some other area water utilities are more likely to see a difference if their water provider also eases restrictions in response to the aquifer authority's decision.

The Edwards Aquifer Authority said it was triggered to ease its restrictions when flow rates at Comal Springs in New Braunfels on Tuesday reached a 10-day average above 100 cubic

feet per second, the trigger level for changing stages.

The springs dipped as low as about 60 cfs in September, but flows have been increasing in recent weeks.

Levels at the J-17 index well in Bexar County also have risen to Stage 3 levels, with a 10-day rolling average of 634.9 feet above mean sea level. The index well has been above 630 feet, the threshold for Stage 3, for more than two weeks, but spring flows took longer to rebound.

The aquifer is refilled by rainfall and runoff in its contributing and recharge zones to the north and west of San Antonio. The Hill Country saw average rain levels in October — a welcome change after several months of below-average precipitation. Boerne and New Braunfels both saw just over 4 inches of rain in the last month.

The Stage 3 restrictions apply to users in seven counties, an area called the San Antonio Pool of the Edwards Aquifer. Those are Atascosa, Bexar, Caldwell, Comal, Guadalupe, Hays and Medina counties.

Edwards Aquifer users in Uvalde County are subject to a different set of restrictions based on the J-27 index well there. They'll remain in Stage 4, with a mandatory reduction to 65%, until the well level reaches 842 feet above mean sea level. It's currently at 840.5; a move to Stage 3 there would cut the restrictions to just a 20% reduction, allowing users to pump up to 80% of their permitted amounts.

Permit holders in the San Antonio Pool have been under restrictions for all of 2023 due to drought conditions and water levels, ranging from Stage 2, which requires 30% reductions,

to Stage 4 when permits are cut by 40%.

As of Thursday, permits have been cut by a total of about 30% this year, said Marc Friberg, the Edwards Aquifer Authority's executive director of external and regulatory affairs.

The mandatory reductions apply only to Edwards Aquifer permit holders, which include municipalities and utilities. Those users can set their own regulations for customers, such as limits on outdoor watering, to meet the required cuts.

The San Antonio Water System will remain in Stage 2, which allows landscape watering with an irrigation system, sprinkler or soaker hose once per week on designated watering days from 7 to 11 a.m. and 7 to 11 p.m.

New Braunfels Utilities also has remained in Stage 2 restrictions through the summer.

Other area utilities have tightened restrictions on their customers to meet the Edwards Aquifer requirements. Alamo Heights, which relies solely on the Edwards Aquifer for its water, entered Stage 4 on July 24, limiting outdoor watering to every other week.

San Marcos entered Stage 4 restrictions in late August, the city's first time in Stage 4 since 2014. Under Stage 4 restrictions in San Marcos, sprinkler use is limited to alternating weeks and is not allowed on weekends.

Texas Water Company, a private water company that serves parts of the Hill Country, also tightened watering restrictions in some areas.

*Newsroom meteorologist Anthony Franze contributed to this story.*

