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**Our treasured springs need protection**

David K. Langford and David Baker

The canary is in the coal mine and he's thirsty. Without thoughtful stewardship, public treasures such as Jacob's Well, Hays County's historic perennial spring, as well as the private legacies of the many unnamed springs feeding Block Creek on Kendall County's historic Hillingdon Ranch could stop flowing forever.

These springs provide a window into the underlying aquifer. For generations, it seemed as if these springs would produce clear, clean water meeting the needs of local residents and sustaining the flow of the nearby Blanco and the Guadalupe Rivers.

When architect Alfred Giles purchased the land that would become Hillingdon Ranch in 1880, he established the headquarters near springs to provide a predictable source of water for his growing family. For six generations, his descendants, including David K. Langford, have been careful stewards of our land to help ensure that these vital springs continue to flow.

Today, our ranch is home to livestock and wildlife, not subdivisions; yet the groundwater level is dropping precipitously. The well that serves the family home was drilled in 1963, and the water level remained constant until the late 1990s. Then the well level began dropping slowly. In the past several years, the loss rate has accelerated, declining almost 50 feet.

This is just one example, but it makes the point that the water beneath the Hill Country is now disappearing at an alarming rate, affecting both public and private water sources. And yet, regional policymakers are trying to ignore the thirsty canary.

In 2005, the Texas Legislature passed House Bill 1763 to promote regional management and conservation of groundwater. The bill mandates joint planning to establish the so-called Desired Future Conditions of the aquifers within the boundaries of Groundwater Management Area 9 across nine counties in the Texas Hill Country. The desired conditions are supposed to be a snapshot of what a specific aquifer will look like in 50 years.

Recently, Groundwater Management Area 9 proposed an additional 30-foot drawdown, which would allow the level of the Trinity Aquifer to be reduced further. The impacts of this action threaten not only public treasures

like Jacob's Well, but the productivity of privately held wells and springs across the region. As a result, the Wimberley Valley Watershed Association filed a petition to the Texas Water Development Board, asking that the additional drawdown request be declared unreasonable.

The water authority is not alone. Public comments recorded at numerous meetings throughout the Hill Country over the past five years showed the public's overwhelming desire to set Desired Future Conditions with a goal of zero drawdown on the aquifers.

Under current pumping conditions, water levels across the region are dropping, providing evidence that we might already be taking more than is being recharged in the Trinity Aquifer. It appears that we already need to decrease withdrawals in the Trinity in critical depletion areas.

The water development board modeled 30 feet of drawdown does not adequately take into account the real-world impacts of cyclical droughts on aquifer water levels and on our region's lifestyle and economy. This action could have disastrous repercussions on the drinking water supply for our region's growing population, including limiting water availability for private landowners.

The increased pressure on the Trinity Aquifer will cause more frequent and longer periods of no base flows to our rivers, which will be felt well beyond our borders. Diminished freshwater in our rivers impacts the riparian habitat along their entire course as well as the downstream ecology of our bays and estuaries.

In addition, the continued taking of groundwater will penalize landowners and families whose voluntary stewardship practices have been replenishing the Trinity Aquifer for generations.

The Hill Country Alliance, in which we are both involved, urges Groundwater Management 9 and the water development board to work together to review the scientific experts' evidence supporting Wimberley Valley Watershed Association's appeal of the requested additional 30-foot drawdown.

Thoughtful, sustainable groundwater management is essential to maintaining flowing springs. These waterways, whether they are a public treasure or a private heritage, are the source of life and prosperity for the Hill Country and deserve our protection.

Langford is the retired CEO of the Texas Wildlife Association and serves on the advisory board of the Hill Country Alliance. Baker is the founder and executive director of the Wimberley Valley Watershed Association. To learn more about Hill Country Alliance initiatives, visit its website at [www.hillcountryalliance.org](http://www.hillcountryalliance.org).