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SERVICE APPROVES EDWARDS AQUIFER RECOVERY IMPLEMENTATION PROGRAM'S INCIDENTAL TAKE PERMIT

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has approved the Edwards Aquifer Recovery Implementation Program's (EARIP) Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) and incidental take permit for the EARIP. The notice of availability of the final Environmental Impact Statement (fEIS) and an incidental take permit for the Edwards Aquifer Recovery Implementation Program (EARIP), including the Habitat Conservation Plan will publish in today's *Federal Register*.

The Edwards Aquifer Recovery Implementation Program's HCP is the result of a successful consensus based collaborative effort by a diverse group of more than forty groups and individuals from south central Texas to address the conservation needs of eight listed species and the needs of the communities' dependent upon the Edwards Aquifer. Issuance of this incidental take permit will enable the Edwards Aquifer Authority; San Antonio Water Systems; the City of New Braunfels, Texas; the City of San Marcos, Texas; and Texas State University (collectively the Applicants) to continue their projects and operations, while preserving protected species and their habitat.

"Approval of the EARIP's HCP marks a significant conservation achievement for the Edwards Aquifer Region," stated Southwest Regional Director Benjamin Tuggle. "The organizations and individuals involved in the development of the HCP clearly demonstrated that it possible to come together and develop a consensus based solution to a very complex water issue in Texas." "The Service commends the efforts of those involved in this long and challenging process and we look forward to working with them to protect the eight listed species while providing certainty to those dependent upon the Edwards Aquifer."

The approved incidental take permit covers activities that would occur in Bexar, Medina and Uvalde Counties and portions of Atascosa, Caldwell, Comal, Guadalupe and Hays Counties in Texas. The HCP describes measures the Applicants agree to undertake to minimize and mitigate the effects of incidental take of the following federally listed species dependent on the springs and river

systems associated with the Edwards Aquifer: the fountain darter, San Marcos salamander, Texas wild rice, Texas blind salamander, Peck's cave amphipod, San Marcos gambusia, Comal Springs dryopid beetle and the Comal Springs riffle beetle.

The HCP covers general activities associated with actions including the regulation and production of groundwater for irrigation, industrial, municipal, domestic, and livestock purposes; the use of instream flows in the Comal River and San Marcos River for recreational uses; and other operational and maintenance activities that could affect Comal Springs, San Marcos Springs and the associated river systems.

Adoption of a multispecies habitat conservation approach, rather than a species-by-species/project-by-project approach, reduces the cost of implementing activities to minimize species impacts and implement mitigation measures. In addition, it reduces the costs and time-consuming efforts associated with processing individual incidental take permits.

The Edwards Aquifer is one of the most prolific artesian aquifers in the world. It is also the source of the two largest springs in Texas: Comal and San Marcos. The Edwards Aquifer is the primary source of drinking water for more than 2 million people including the seventh largest city in the nation (San Antonio) and serves the domestic, agricultural, industrial and recreational needs of the area.

You may obtain copies of the EIS and HCP online at <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/AustinTexas/>.

America's fish, wildlife, and plant resources belong to all of us, and ensuring the health of imperiled species is a shared responsibility. We're working to actively engage conservation partners and the public in the search for improved and innovative ways to conserve and recover imperiled species.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov. Connect with our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/usfws, follow our tweets at www.twitter.com/usfws watch our YouTube Channel at <http://www.youtube.com/usfws> and download photos from our Flickr page at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfws>.

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