Proposed Water Pipeline Concerns Many in South Central Texas

Numerous South Central Texas local governments and citizens are alarmed by a bill filed in the Texas Legislature by a San Antonio representative that would allow a private company to annually pipe 40,000 acre feet of rural Edwards Aquifer water to the San Antonio area. If passed, the bill would change the Edwards Aquifer Authority Act of 1993, to eliminate a provision prohibiting transfer of aquifer water out of Uvalde and Medina counties.

"That prohibition is there for a very good reason," said Mario Cruz, a Uvalde citizen and member of the Edwards Aquifer Authority board. "It protects the water supply of one the most important agricultural areas in the region. "The economy of this area and thousands of jobs could be threatened if we begin to lose our water. A study by Texas Agri-Life Extension estimated very conservatively that the value of our agricultural output would drop by three to four times without irrigation. And it's not just agriculture we are concerned about. The Edwards Aquifer is the source of our wells, and numerous springs and rivers that supply water not just to us but potentially downstream communities as far away as Corpus Christi. This plan has both moral and social implications. We just can't let this pipeline happen."

Proposed legislation that facilitates this pipeline, HB 814 will be heard April 19th in the House Natural Resource Committee. Groups opposing the project have organized and created a website for education and outreach, www.keepourwater.org.

The Hill Country Alliance passed a policy resolution last fall that opposes significant water transfers unless there is clarity that the sending water system will not be negatively impacted, in other words, that there will be "no harm".

Private interests have sought to exploit Uvalde/Medina water since at least 2003. This latest attempt comes from Southwest Texas Water Resources, Inc. (STWR), a group of investors whose justifications for the pipeline have been heavily criticized by organizations across South Texas. In fact, over 60 mostly government entities have voiced strong opposition to the pipeline. Prominent among them is the Nueces River Authority, which has gone on record in opposing the legislation.

Con Mims, executive director of the Nueces River Authority, faults the "scientific assumptions of STWR. They are trying to use data from an Edwards Aquifer Authority hydrological model, known as MODFLOW, which loses much of its accuracy when applied to the Uvalde Pool of the Edwards Aquifer. They make the claim that there is plenty of water available for export to San Antonio. In reality, most experts agree that the hydrology of the Uvalde Pool is not well understood--there are too few detailed studies of the Uvalde Pool to date."

"We simply don't know what the impact of that much withdrawal will be. A sustainable level for the Uvalde Pool has never been established. STWR has also wrongly asserted that a pipeline will diversify

San Antonio's water resources because the Uvalde Pool is separated from the rest of the Edwards Aquifer. An average of about 60,000 acre feet of water a year passes from the Uvalde Pool, as water moves from west to east in the Edwards Aquifer. If you are pumping the Uvalde Pool, you are pumping Edwards Aquifer water, and the region has set a policy of moving away from reliance on the Edwards Aquifer," stated Mims.

The South Central Texas Water Advisory Council has also expressed strong reservations about the proposed pipeline. This group representing 17 counties and the cities of San Antonio, Victoria and Corpus Christi has raised "serious concerns about private interests that are actively trying to change legislation… that would facilitate transferring water from the Uvalde Pool to potential customers in the eastern portions of EAA. EAA staff has indicated "that the current model was not developed nor calibrated to estimate the impact of these withdrawals on minor aquifers, springs, and river flows dependent on the Edwards Aquifer Uvalde Pool." Large withdrawals from the Uvalde Pool will decrease the natural flow of water across the Knippa Gap and slow the Leona and other springs.

Another dimension to the potential pumping of additional water from the Uvalde Pool is the impact that more water withdrawals will have on an extensive, and still unresolved, process known as the Edwards Aquifer Recovery Implementation Program. The EARIP is a unique collaborative stakeholder group formed by the Texas Legislature in 2007 at the behest of U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service to develop a regional solution to protect threatened and endangered species at Comal and San Marcos springs, which are fed by the Edwards Aquifer. USFWS is due to approve or disapprove this proposed solution in late 2012.

"EARIP has listened to several presentations by STWR regarding this pipeline and its claimed benefits to the endangered species at the springs. If EARIP was impressed with the project, it would be included in its draft protection plan and EARIP, likely, would be supporting legislation to facilitate the project. Neither is the case", said Mims.

Indeed, Sierra Club representative to EARIP Tyson Broad has said that the company promised to study the effect of water withdrawals, particularly springflows, on the Uvalde area; more than a year ago. While they have developed some limited MODFLOW-based data, peer review of its conclusions, which has repeatedly been requested, has not occurred. Personally, I want to see some peer-reviewed science about the effects of this pipeline before they go ahead with this," Broad commented.

"What is so striking about this resistance to the proposed pipeline is how broad based it truly is," said John Harrell, former city manager of Uvalde and an anti-pipeline activist. "The prospect of that thing scares just about everybody in this whole region. I've never seen so many different people, everybody from growers to realtors to bankers and those in between are together in their opposition. The entire community is united in opposition to the proposed pipeline."