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Debates on water won't run out for a long time

Harm to those at source at issue

By Brendan Gibbons STAFF WRITER

AUSTIN — Colleen Waring's farm relies on two shallow wells that tap groundwater in the Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer below Milam County.

With three separate projects to pipe millions of gallons of water from her area to the Austin and San Antonio metro region on the horizon, Waring worries that overpumping eventually could cause her wells to run dry.

"I really am willing to share, but not to beggar myself," she said at a meeting Tuesday of the state House Natural Resources Committee that focused on the buying and selling of water across the state.

Legislators took testimony from water utilities, attorneys, economists and environmental groups, trying to grapple with how best to transfer from water-rich to water-poor areas without harming people at the source.

Waring's water rights on her 117 acres have not been leased for the End-Op, Forestar or Vista Ridge water projects, all of which would involve the sale of water from aquifers below Burleson, Milam, Bastrop and Lee counties and the delivery of it to the rapidly urbanizing Interstate 35 corridor. The Vista Ridge pipeline project, under development by a privately owned company, would send 16.3 billion gallons per year to the San Antonio Water System from a well field in Burleson County under the domain of the Post Oak Savannah Water Conservation District, which regulates pumping in part of the Carrizo Wilcox.

Another private company, Forestar Real Estate Group, recently settled with the Lost Pines Groundwater Conservation District for it to also pump from the Carrizo Wilcox — 3.9 billion gallons per year at first, then up to 9.2 billion gallons annually, depending on groundwater monitoring results.

The water would be sold to users in Bastrop, Hays, Lee, Travis and Williamson counties.

End-Op has asked for at least 8.2 billion gallons per year, though its permit is stalled in the Lost Pines district.

Together, these projects would account for more than double the projected local demand from the Simsboro layer of the Carrizo-Wilcox in the Lost Pines and Post Oak Savannah groundwater districts by 2060.

Pumping that much water from the Carrizo-Wilcox likely will cause levels in deep wells to drop, in some cases by hundreds of feet, San Antonio hydrologist George Rice warned at a news conference Tuesday organized by the League of Independent Voters. The group has tried to rally landowners to protect the aquifers from over-pumping.

Rice used a computer model created by the Texas Water Development Board for his study, an update to an earlier version that only focused on Vista Ridge pumping.

Other hydrologists have made similar predictions about well level declines but say the aquifer holds enough water to avoid serious impacts.

“People say we don’t need to worry about how much water we pump from the Simsboro because there’s so much water,” Rice said. “Well, that’s half true. . . . The aquifer will not be drained, but the water levels in some wells will decline.”

He warned of declines in shallow wells like Waring’s, where there are no other aquifers below them. Such declines also will reduce flow in the Brazos and Colorado rivers that get water from the aquifer as they run over it, Rice said.

Post Oak Savannah has rules that could, in theory, allow the district to cut back on pumping to avoid excessive declines. Lost Pines, an adjacent district, has taken a different approach by allowing Forestar to step up its pumping only after monitoring shows pumping the initial 3.9 billion gallons per year will not affect wells too severely.

House members discussed the Legislature’s role in the rush for water in these counties and beyond.

Rep. John Cyrier, R-Lockhart, said at Rice’s news conference that he would support a bill requiring water marketers to pay for drilling new wells or lowering pumping equipment if a landowner’s well is damaged by a water supply project.

“The rest of Texas should realize that someone is paying a price” for these water projects, he said.

Committee members Rep. Lyle Larson, R-San Antonio, and fellow Republican Rep. Trent Ashby of Lufkin, debated the state’s vs. private sector’s role in moving water from where it’s more abundant to where it’s more scarce in Texas.

Larson favors a more centrally planned water grid, or “hydrovascular system,” and introduced legislation in the last session that would help clear the way for development of major water arteries that would cross river basins and groundwater districts.

“To sustain our growth, we can’t take this myopic, parochial approach,” Larson said.

Ashby described such a proposed water grid and other legislative interference in the water market — where private companies often work with municipal entities or water supply corporations on a local scale — as a “solution in search of problem.”

“It’s way premature for us to get involved in a system that’s working,” he said.

Debates likely will continue over the years. Other than the developed water markets of the Edwards Aquifer and the lower Rio Grande, most of Texas is an “early stage market,” economist Clay Landry of WestWater Research, a consulting company, told the committee.

“We find (Texas) to be a very interesting market and one we expect to grow in years to come,” he said. bgibbons@express-news.net

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Timeline: Browse the history of the Vista Ridge pipeline project.

More coverage: An interactive look at the Carrizo-Wilcox aquifer.

Pumping from the Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer

The Vista Ridge pipeline will rely on water pumped from geologic layers in the Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer thousands of feet below Central Texas. Some towns and landowners already tap the aquifer with deep and shallow wells, which function differently. Vista Ridge would draw up to 16.3 billion gallons per year from two formations, 70% from the Simsboro and 30% from the Carrizo. The project's opponents point to reports questioning whether pumping that volume of water will deplete it too much, yet some geologists say there is enough water for hundreds of years of heavy withdrawal.

