

ANOTHER VIEW

Rural folks have the right to protect their water

by Curtis Chubb

If a city 142 miles away from San Antonio were to announce that it planned to drill wells into the Edwards Aquifer near San Antonio and annually pump so much groundwater that the water table would drop 300 feet

— would that be allowed to happen?

I'll answer that question: No.

The Edwards Aquifer Authority would block the water project because it has the responsibility to protect and conserve the Edwards Aquifer.

It strikes me as paradoxical that state Rep. Lyle Larson criticizes rural county groundwater districts for trying to do the very same thing — that is, protect and conserve the aquifers within their boundaries.

Larson's hometown aquifer is protected — but he criticizes other areas of Texas because they want to protect their aquifers? Now, that sounds "un-Texan" to me. "Un-Texan" is a term that Larson used in a San Antonio Express-News comment published in October. In that comment, he announced that he would use his position in the Texas House "to put an end to the so-called 'water wars.' They are simply un-Texan."

Larson has pushed the theme that water problems in Texas are caused by groundwater districts. At a March House Natural Resources Committee hearing, Larson said, "If we can't sustain our economy because we have this entrenchment that takes place at a local level — and we can't move water where we need to move it because people feel like they're entitled to it — but you have people willing to pay property owners for that water — but the groundwater districts become an obstruction, someone has to intervene."

In contrast, Larson and San Antonio Water System CEO Robert Puente glorify the groundwater district in my part of Texas (Milam/Burleson counties) because they approved the pumping permits for the Vista Ridge project, which will lower our water table by 300 feet.

However, because many people in Milam/Burleson counties protested the Vista Ridge project that will export massive amounts of groundwater to San Antonio, SAWS Trustee Reed Williams attempted to calm us "country folk" by promising to "protect your aquifer as I do mine" at a SAWS meeting in September. Yet the contract that SAWS signed with Abengoa Vista Ridge contains nothing about SAWS protecting our aquifers.

Instead, the SAWS/Abengoa Vista Ridge contract says that each pipeline easement "expressly includes installation of multiple water lines in the future." To me this means that they plan to pump a lot more water from our aquifers than advertised.

I don't think SAWS worries too much about protecting our aquifers. In December at a meeting in Burleson County, the San Antonio Express-News reported, Williams went further and said, "We have no interest in running to Austin in trying to usurp the power of this authority" if the groundwater district ever mandates a cutback in pumping.

Abengoa Vista Ridge has a different take on that subject.

The director of business development for Abengoa Water USA, Michael Irlbeck, wrote a letter to SAWS in 2013, obtained through a public information request. He addressed what would happen if the groundwater district cut back Abengoa Vista Ridge's pumping: "Even so, were the impact of such changes to not be fully mitigated by the Abengoa team's excess leasehold position, we believe that Groundwater Management Area 12 and the Texas Legislature would recognize and protect the substantial, investment-backed expectations of Abengoa and the community of San Antonio." In simple words, they would be running to Austin.

So, who is mistaken about running to Austin if the Milam/Burleson counties groundwater district tries to cut back the pumping — Williams or a company with a \$3.4 billion investment on the line?

I believe Larson should use his position in the House to prevent larger cities from using their political and financial clout to take unsustainable amounts of groundwater from rural counties. We all have the right to provide water for our children

— San Antonio's right is not one drop of groundwater more important than the rights of Dime Box, Fairview or Gonzales.

To think otherwise is not only “un-Texan,” it is “un-San Antonian.”

Curtis Chubb, Ph.D., has published more than 1,000 articles about groundwater in Texas. He serves as the coordinator for the Central Texas Aquifers Coalition and lives on his ranch in Milam County.

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