

# Opinion

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## What part of drought don't San Antonians understand?



MARVIN PFEIFFER / MARVIN PFEIFFER / San Antonio Express-News

San Antonio in Stage 2 while much of Edwards aquifer communities are in Stage 4, presents an avoidable options problem. Water sprinklers in front of a home on W. Summit Ave. in Monte Vista on Thursday, July 25, 2013. San Antonio is currently in Stage 2 water restrictions. Under that stage, landscape watering with an irrigation system, sprinkler or soaker hose is allowed only once a week from 7-11 a.m. and 7-11 p.m. on designated watering days determined address. MARVIN PFEIFFER/ mpfeiffer@express-news.net

**By O. Ricardo Pimentel**

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SAN ANTONIO — San Antonio, we've got a problem.

An image problem.

Our neighbors believe we are water hogs — wallowing in their lifeblood to feed our desire for unrestrained growth.



Not entirely true, of course (I'll get back to that "not entirely" in a sec). But perception, as they say, can be everything.

SAN ANTONIO — San Antonio both owns and is a customer of the San Antonio Water System. The city is at Stage 2 restrictions. The region served by the Edwards Aquifer Authority is at the more restrictive Stage 4.

You see the problem. Texas is gripped with drought. Elsewhere, folks dependent on the low Edward Aquifer are saying, "Water, water, oh, where is the water," right before answering their own question. Well, of course, it's over in Stage 2 San Antonio, watering lawns.

When the aquifer gets low, the EAA cuts back on permits to pumpers such as SAWS. This is why all the aquifer area is at EAA Stage 4.

But a San Antonio ordinance allows SAWS to avoid imposing the city's own stages if it can demonstrate supplies from elsewhere, among other things. And, through conservation, storage and development of other sources, it has.

In other words, San Antonio is at a mere Stage 2 — only once a week lawn watering, by the way — because it has been a wise steward of its water. And, still, I'm just going to have to side with our neighbors on this one point. We should quit watering our (your favorite expletive, here) lawns.

If nothing else, the optics are simply horrible. So, here's a suggestion.

The Edwards Aquifer Authority folks tell me that they believe their board has the rule-making authority to simply tell customers, San Antonio included, "Hey, you can't use Edwards water to keep your (same expletive) lawns green."

Sans the expletive, it can forbid its water for this use. It should. Immediately. On second thought, add the expletive.

It's a political minefield. San Antonians will say, "You can have this sprinkler after you pry it from my cold, dead hands."

The EAA Board had considered emergency drought management rules in 2000, with some provision for outdoor watering. But, today, it prefers to leave such restrictions up to permit holders, though groundwater conservation plans are on file that say which best practices will be employed when using Edwards water.

There is a theory that passing a direct rule on lawn watering that is unenforceable is a fool's errand. The EAA board should be foolish.

At the very least, this will force the other guy's hand. Or force him to explain why he isn't complying. And it is enforceable. By SAWS and other local water districts.

SAWS says it supplied 76.9 billion gallons to customers in 2013, expected usage in 2014 as well. So, say 40 percent of that is used outdoors (as high as 45 percent in peak summer heat). Not all of that is being used to water lawns — people wash cars and other stuff outdoors, firefighters douse fires, pools get filled, etc. But it's safe to say most of this is being used on landscapes.

Forty percent of 76.9 billion gallons is 30.7 billion gallons.

SAWS — using a \$3.4 billion, 142-mile pipeline from Central Texas — wants to buy 16.3 billion gallons of water a year for 30 years from the Vista Ridge Consortium. We likely use more water than that in San Antonio for outdoor uses, including watering lawns.

A spokeswoman told me that SAWS gets 76 percent of its water from the Edwards Aquifer, an average to date in 2014.

Critics fear that this "new" water from the Vista Ridge project will be used to fuel development that will further drain the aquifer, polluting it as well. It's difficult to make the case that we properly manage our growth with an abiding concern for protecting the aquifer if we can't even quit watering our lawns.

Yes, SAWS plans, conserves and stores very well. And, yes, future growth and preserving the aquifer spell a need to develop other water sources. So, at the moment, I favor this pipeline. Our solutions have to be regional. But what's it say when we use more water for our lawns than what we'll be buying from elsewhere? Optics.

Dear EAA Board: Help make us quit watering our lawns. We seem to have a problem with that first step in battling addiction — admitting we have a problem.

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