

Make our aquifer sustainable

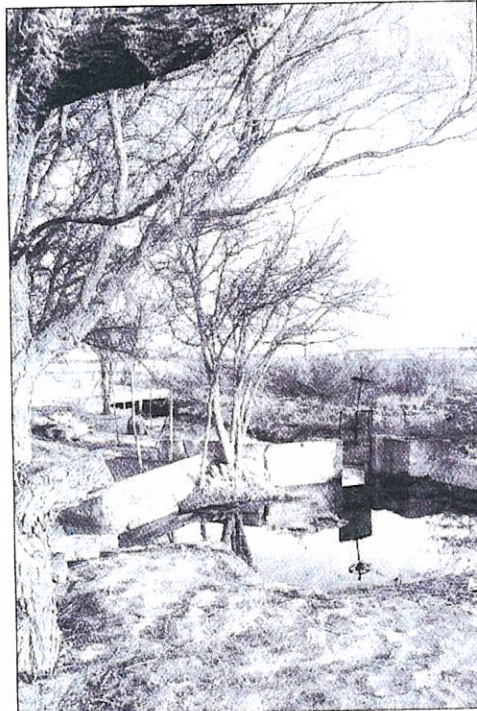
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BELDING FARMS

Every five years, groundwater regulators in Texas set policy and philosophy for managing the aquifers in their jurisdictions, and that is happening now in Pecos County.

The Middle Pecos Groundwater Conservation District is setting policy and philosophy for the Edwards-Trinity Aquifer, though the process is overlooking a major risk to its sustainability. That risk is the potential export of groundwater from our area to other without sufficient consideration of the impacts to our residents, our economy, and Comanche Springs.

We at Belding Farms are concerned, and believe the residents of Pecos County should be, too. As a family-owned pecan farm that has operated near Fort Stockton for more than 60 years, we are invested in the community and the sustainability of the Edwards-Trinity Aquifer and other aquifers in the area.

The impacts of potential groundwater exports to the Edwards-Trinity Aquifer and springs should be addressed by the Middle Pecos Groundwater Conservation District in its policy-setting process known as Desired Future Conditions. That process describes the conditions of the aquifer that the District desires in 50 years, such as water levels, spring flows, amount of water in storage, and water quality. Desired Future Conditions are set by groundwater management areas, which group groundwater conservation districts together.



The main irrigation canal from Comanche Springs splits into the Highline Canal and 7-D Canal. Photo courtesy of Robert Mace.

We submitted written comments on the Desired Future Conditions to Groundwater Management Areas No. 3 and 7 on Jan. 19 and 21, respectively. Pecos County straddles these two areas. All Groundwater Management Areas must propose to adopt Desired Future Conditions by May 1, and finally adopt them by Jan. 5, 2022.

Here are our concerns about the proposed Desired Future Conditions and our recommendations for addressing them.

Landowners' private property rights to the groundwater beneath their land - as ownership of groundwater in place - are jeopardized by the silence of the Desired Future Conditions on the potential for groundwater exports. We recommend that the Middle Pecos Groundwater Con-

servation District address impacts to landowners in our county from groundwater exports to locations outside the District.

Regional water planners are recommending exports from our area that could create water shortages within Pecos County, and jeopardize economic opportunities in the future. The State Legislature recognized this risk as early as 1997, and reiterated its concern in an interim report for the current legislative session that began on Jan. 12. We recommend that the District consider water supply impacts and possible creation of unmet water needs specific to Pecos County resulting from groundwater exports.

The absence of spring flow restoration and preservation in the Desired Future Conditions undermines the Conser-

vation District's mission to "maintain a sustainable, adequate, reliable, cost effective and high quality source of groundwater to promote the vitality, economy and environment of the District."

Moreover, the Legislature is worried about gaps between surface water and groundwater regulation. The House Natural Resources Committee's interim report cites a current study of Comanche Springs that examines the potential for water projects to meet the changing needs of municipal and agricultural users, while enabling restoration of year-round spring flow.

We recommend that the District address with greater specificity how the Desired Future Conditions will help preserve and restore Comanche Springs' important flows. We believe that depleted spring flows indicate groundwater uses that are not sustainable.

The socioeconomic impacts of groundwater supply in Pecos County are analyzed too broadly, and without enough specificity for certain sectors of our economy, such as agriculture. We recommend that the District quantify in greater detail the seasonal impacts on specific landowners of continued groundwater depletion that will likely cause more permanent impacts. These seasonal impacts are of critical importance for agricultural users of groundwater, such as Belding Farms.

In short, we believe the time is ripe to ensure that groundwater regulation in Pecos County avoids picking winners and losers. We must seek regulation that is fair to all residents, landowners, businesses, and Comanche Springs.

FORT STOCKTON PIONEER
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