

## Commentary: Why you should care about groundwater pumping in Hays County

By Vanessa Puig-Williams

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Barton Springs, the Austin's beloved spring-fed swimming pool, is the crown jewel of the city – the soul of this soulful town. Almost a million people cooled off in the springs in 2018, and more than a million swimmers are expected to return in 2019. It is a special place, cherished by almost every Austinite, but it's future could be in jeopardy.

The springs have enjoyed protection because two federally listed endangered species of salamander call the springs home. The Barton Springs Edwards Aquifer Conservation District regulates groundwater production from the Edwards Aquifer (the primary source of water for the springs) to ensure the springs continue to flow and habitat for the salamanders is protected.

In recent years, hydrogeologists studying groundwater flow in the Trinity Aquifer to the west of Austin in Hays County have learned the Trinity is also a source of water for Barton Springs. Scientists injected dye into recharge features in the Blanco River and Onion Creek, and the dye turned up in Barton Springs. We now know that water flowing in Onion Creek and the Blanco River disappears underground into the Trinity Aquifer and eventually recharges Barton Springs. In fact, during drought, hydrogeologists have confirmed that flow from Barton Springs originates from water that once made its way down the Blanco River.

Water in Hays County is connected to water in Austin. This is the reason that the city of Austin recently approved a resolution to oppose the Kinder Morgan gas pipeline, which is proposed to slice through the Edwards and Trinity Aquifers. It is also why the City has invested millions of dollars to conserve large tracts of land in Hays County – to limit development on the land in order to protect the water flowing over it and beneath it.

Unlike the Edwards Aquifer, however, there are not stringent limitations on groundwater production from the Trinity Aquifer. Scientists have not yet determined what amount of groundwater can be pumped from the Trinity Aquifer in perpetuity without causing rivers and springs to dry up. This is particularly worrisome because as the population of Central Texas continues to grow and utilities search for additional water supplies, the Trinity Aquifer has become a target.

Some landowners in Hays County see an opportunity to make a significant amount of money by selling or leasing their groundwater (similar to oil and gas) to companies who intend to produce, export, and sell it to meet growing water supply needs. Currently, a Houston-based company, Electro Purification LLC, is seeking a groundwater permit from the Barton Springs Edwards Aquifer Conservation District to produce almost a billion gallons of groundwater a year from the Trinity Aquifer near Wimberley – an amount of water that will draw down aquifer levels by hundreds of feet. Unfortunately, there will likely be more attempts in the future to develop and commoditize the Trinity Aquifer in Hays County, exacerbating water level declines in the Aquifer and potentially reducing flow at Barton Springs.

We must protect groundwater in Hays County to ensure our beloved Barton Springs continues to flow. The city should continue its commitment to protecting groundwater to the west of Austin by investing in additional science to help hydrogeologists determine the sustainable yield of the Trinity Aquifer and to help scientists understand the impacts massive groundwater production will have on the aquifer and the springs and surface waterways it sustains.

Furthermore, Austin should urge the Barton Springs Edwards Aquifer Conservation District board of directors to adopt a moratorium on any new large volume groundwater permit applications from the Trinity Aquifer in Hays County until this science has been developed. Protecting the Trinity Aquifer means protecting Barton Springs.

*Puig-Williams is the executive director and general counsel of the Trinity Edwards Springs Protection Association and is a board member of the Wimberley Valley Watershed Association and the Hill County Alliance.*

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