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Pape: Take a careful, public approach to groundwater development

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Posted: 7:00 p.m. Monday, Oct. 13, 2014



By Paul Pape - Special to the American-Statesman

The Alamo is Texas' most recognizable icon. "Remember the Alamo" has inspired generations of Texans.

Please pardon my weak pun, but let's "Remember the Ogallala." The Ogallala Aquifer of the Texas High Plains has been over-pumped for decades by the very industry it supports. Now, in some places, it is depleted. Let's learn from their mistakes and do better. Let's protect and preserve the Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer here in Central Texas, especially the Simsboro formation.

Some criticize conservative permitting of groundwater. They suggest removing oversight of aquifers from local districts, in favor of the private sector. That would be like having the fox guard the henhouse. A careful, public approach to groundwater development is the only prudent strategy.

While the Texas Supreme Court has held that groundwater is a personal property right, the Texas Legislature addressed the bigger issue by creating conservation districts. It gave them powers to set

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desired future conditions and determine modeled available groundwater for aquifers. These districts provide important local influence and control over aquifer management.

The way I see it, although groundwater is a privately held mineral right, the aquifer storing it is a state resource. Nobody should be able to pump an aquifer dry. That's why groundwater conservation districts are essential and must be protected by the courts and Legislature.

The Ogallala had been the most productive aquifer in Texas, nourishing a \$3 billion-a-year agriculture industry on the South Plains. It was thought to be inexhaustible. Now folks are admitting that this great natural resource has limits. An August [Associated Press article](#) published in the American-Statesman asserted that the entire High Plains region of Texas has less than a 50-year supply of groundwater. The Center for Geospatial Technology estimates that some High Plains counties will be dry in less than 15 years. The cause is simple. According to a U.S. Geological Survey hydrologist, "You're still using water at a much faster rate than it is being recharged."

This hits pretty close to home for some of my family. For over 40 years, my younger sister, Laura, and her husband Richard farmed on the High Plains, just over in New Mexico. Irrigated from the Ogallala Aquifer underlying the region, the sandy soil supported good crops of peanuts, cotton and corn. Through hard work and sacrifice, they accumulated more than 1,600 acres of farmland about 100 miles northwest of Lubbock.

When they started farming in the late 1960s, the water table under their land was shallow. As years went by they saw big changes in farming practices and in the aquifer. Finally, in 2012, with water supplies exhausted and crop production falling, Richard and Laura sold out. Their dream of passing the family farm down to the next generation dried up with the water.

This is an important lesson for us here in Central Texas. Yes, we can put our aquifers to work, but we must be vigilant to assure sustainability. I'm concerned about huge volumes of water to be harvested from the Simsboro Aquifer in Burleson County. Groundwater there and in neighboring Milam County is under the protection of the Post Oak Savannah Groundwater Conservation District. However, marketers have been permitted more than 124,000 acre feet per year of groundwater there. That's twice the state-approved modeled available groundwater of 61,020 acre-feet annually. How is that sustainable? Such over-selling of a limited resource should worry all Central Texans.

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I appreciate the Lost Pine's conservative approach of strict limits on permitting. Once permits are issued and pumping begins, it will be tough and expensive to force cutbacks. A \$3 billion investor is not going to just quietly stop pumping, even when the aquifer shows signs of depletion.

State regulatory control is essential for the protection of groundwater. Will we deplete our aquifers and leave future generations high and dry, like on the High Plains? Don't let that happen here in Central Texas. "Remember the Ogallala!"

Pape is Bastrop County judge.

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Bastrop Countians, heed Judge Pape's words!

Come to an urgent meeting on this THIS Saturday, October 18, 2 pm -3:30 pm at the Bastrop Library.

We need everyone's help to reach San Antonio voters to ask them to call their City Council members to urge them to slow down the Vista Ridge Project. This 142-mile pipeline from Burleson County (and the Simsboro) to San Antonio will take 50,000 acre-feet-year from a portion of the aquifer that recharges at 2,000 acre-feet per year. That's planned depletion, just like we depleted the Ogallala.

Learn more at StopWaterGrab.org (look for the Vista Ridge page soon to be posted) and if you live in Bastrop County, we hope to see you this Saturday!

Linda Curtis, League of Independent Voters of Texas
512-213-4511

11:47 a.m. Oct. 14, 2014

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