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Drought Causes Edwards Aquifer Region's Habitat Conservation Plan to Trigger "Provision M"

All work being done around Comal Springs is stopped for Fish and Wildlife review

Lower flows in the Comal Springs caused by the ongoing drought have stopped work projects in New Braunfels associated with the Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) until officials can ensure no damage is being done to endangered species or their habitats.

According to Provision M of U.S. Fish and Wildlife (USFWS) Incidental Take Permit, work near the springs must stop when flow at the Comal Springs reaches 130 cubic feet per second. Activities which disturb habitat or the listed species are no longer covered when flows drop below these levels.

"While we can't control the weather, we can control how we prepare for these extremely dry periods, and that's what the HCP is all about," said Tom Taggart, HCP Implementing Committee chairman. "We know the springs lose flow and water levels across the Edwards Aquifer can drop significantly during prolonged droughts. The good news is that the region has done a very good job of coming together to help us minimize impacts as much as possible."

Current HCP work includes:

- flow-split construction project designed to keep water in the Comal Springs old channel where most of the endangered species and habitats flourish;
- sediment removal program to take out excess erosion materials that could cover up habitats in the Comal;
- vegetation restoration efforts to remove exotic vegetation and replace with native vegetation that represents prime habitat for the species during lower flows in the Comal Springs.

"Due to the HCP programs implemented in 2013, the Edwards Aquifer, spring flows, endangered species, and their habitats have a fighting chance to weather this current drought," said Tom Taggart. "Overall, the HCP regional stakeholder efforts are designed to strike the right balance in protecting spring flows, ensuring all water users have the water they need each day and preserving the Edwards Aquifer as a resource."

In addition to new HCP science being applied to Edwards Aquifer protection, residents and businesses are encouraged to continue their water conservation efforts as well. Make sure all water leaks are repaired, and reduce indoor water use by using high efficiency fixtures and appliances. Outdoors, only water your landscape when it is needed, and make sure to follow your local area's Critical Period watering guidelines.

The Edwards Aquifer is a unique groundwater resource and primary source of water for more than 2 million people in Uvalde, Medina, Bexar, Comal, and Hays Counties, supporting domestic, industrial, and agricultural water needs. The Edwards Aquifer is also the source of the only two major springs remaining in Texas - the San Marcos and the Comal. These springs feed the San Marcos and Comal Rivers, which are tributaries to the Guadalupe River. The Habitat Conservation Plan was developed to protect and preserve this vital water resource. You can read more about the HCP at www.eahcp.org.

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Supplemental Information

The Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) contains 26 specific endangered species habitat protection measures. The full list can be viewed at: www.eachp.org/index.php/flow_protection. Following are some of the major programs included in the HCP.

Flow Split Management - The City of New Braunfels is constructing a series of pipes and valves to regulate the flow of water in the Landa Lake Old and New Channels. Endangered Species are found in the Old Channel. The New Channel is man-made, and over time has made flows to endangered species habitat in the Old Channel irregular, which can harm habitats. The Flow Split System will give New Braunfels a means to regulate flows into the Old Channel, thus protecting species habitats.
www.eahcp.org/index.php/habitat_protection/comal_springs/flow_split_management.

Provision M - Provision M is part of the federal incidental take permit and is triggered when the Comal Springs reach a flow of 130 cubic feet per second (CFS) and/or the San Marcos Springs reaches 120 CFS. This provision requires all HCP program work (construction, sampling, sediment removal, etc.) to stop so the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWs) can determine whether the work will damage endangered species/habitats.

State Scientific Areas - When flow at the San Marcos Springs reaches 120 cubic feet per second, HCP staff and consultants will secure areas of the San Marcos River to protect species and habitats from recreational activities occurring on the river. For example, at lower flows, Texas Wild Rice can become exposed to tubing recreation in the river. So to preserve those areas, Texas Parks and Wildlife will place buoys in the area to keep people from harming the species and habitats.

Biological Monitoring - When spring flows in New Braunfels reach 120 cubic feet per second, the HCP triggers more frequent biological monitoring of the endangered species and habitats. Currently, comprehensive biological monitoring occurs twice a year. Once the biological monitoring trigger in the HCP occurs, biological monitoring increases to every other week. This type of ecology evaluation includes water quality testing, vegetation mapping and species collection and testing.

Sediment Removal - Sediment coming from river bank erosion can alter flows of the river and cover up endangered species habitat. To address this issue, the City of San Marcos removes sediment from the river bottom at various locations from City Park to IH-35. Divers are trained to recognize Texas Wild Rice and other endangered species in sediment removal. They also remove non-native plants in their work. Sediment samples are sent to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality for contaminant testing.

Native Riparian Habitat Restorations - The City of San Marcos is replacing non-native plants with native plants in locations from City Park to I-35. Area residents are also being asked to participate in the restoration program. Texas State University is undertaking a similar program in Sewell Park. Vegetation such as big bluestem, switchgrass, Indian grass, live oak, Texas red oak, bur oak, pecan, bald cypress, American beautyberry, and buttonbush is being planted.