

Helicopter to be used in salt test
Petronila Creek shown to have high level of salt

By Matthew Sturdevant
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Sometime this month a helicopter flying 200 feet above ground and towing a missile-shaped device will be hovering over Petronila Creek to test the area for salt content.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality has done a preliminary test using electromagnetic frequencies to measure salt content in the soil and water around Petronila Creek.

This test will be more extensive. What the agency found in the initial test was very high levels of salt - in some cases almost half as salty as Gulf of Mexico water.

"It's fairly fresh north of (U.S.) Highway 77," said Jeffrey G. Paine, a research scientist for the Bureau of Economic Geology at the University of Texas.

The concentrations of total dissolved solids - primarily sodium and chlorine - jump from 520 milligrams per liter north of Highway 77 to 9,260 milligrams per liter south of the bridge.

Farther downstream was a measurement of 14,000 milligrams per liter. Gulf of Mexico water is about 33,000 milligrams per liter and tap water is about 400 milligrams per liter, Paine said.

The concern is that the salt isn't good for vegetation or aquatic life in the stream, said Kerry Niemann, project manager of the commission's Total Maximum Daily Load team, which deals with the way various elements such as salt affect the quality of water sources, according to commission documents.

Most of the salt content is within the top several yards of soil and water in and around the creek, so people who have wells shouldn't be alarmed at the salt content, Niemann said. Wells typically draw water from several hundred yards below the surface and there's enough sand to filter out the salt, Niemann said.

Data from the recent study will be available within six weeks, Paine said, and a comprehensive study identifying sources of the salt content will be available at the end of the summer.

Possible sources are gas and oil wells in the area, salty air blowing in from the Gulf, salt water flooding and salt deposits in the soil.