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Texas Groundwater Protection Committee calls on state Legislature to conserve statewide groundwater resources

Catharine Li , Senior News Reporter

The Texas Groundwater Protection Committee released its biennial report to the state Legislature this month calling to establish a statewide fund to plug abandoned water wells.

Groundwater, which is stored in underground aquifers, supplies approximately 60% of Texas' water supply, according to the Environmental Defense Fund of Texas. The report states that of the 1.5 million water wells in Texas, an estimated 150,000 water wells are either abandoned or deteriorated, posing a significant contamination risk to aquifers.

A neglected or improperly constructed well allows contaminants like fertilizer or pesticides to bypass layers of soil and sediment which act as filters, said Justin Thompson, an assistant research professor in the University's Bureau of Economic Geology. Thompson studies the relationship between water resource management and planning.

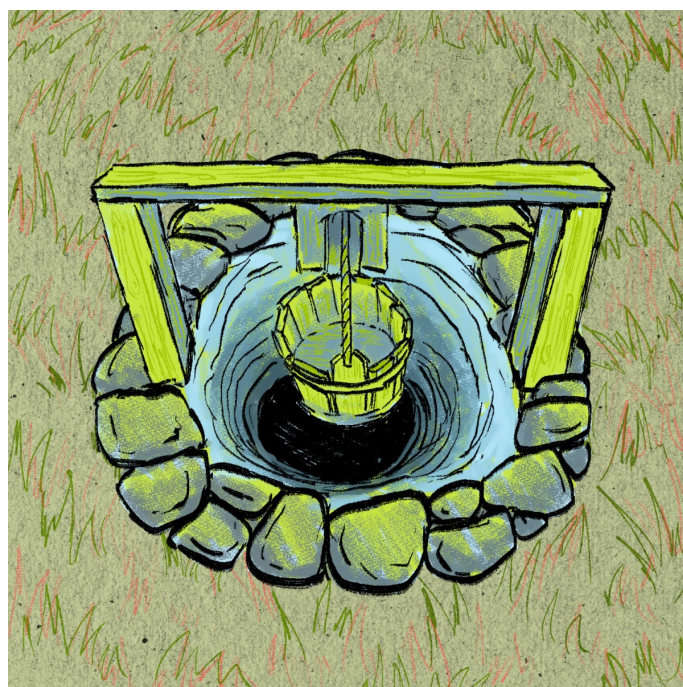
"Deteriorated wells break all those rules because now there's a direct line from the surface all the way through all of those layers, including that high-quality water," said Thompson, a bureau representative on the committee.

According to the Shoal Creek Conservancy, the majority of Austin's drinking water comes from the Colorado River. The Barton Springs segment of the Edwards Aquifer provides drinking water for approximately 60,000 people from South Austin to Kyle, according to the Barton Springs Edwards Aquifer Conservation District.

At least 34 water wells are located within the main University campus and the West Campus area, according to data from the Texas Water Development Board. There is not enough information to determine if the wells' status is up-to-date.

Under state law, individual property owners are responsible for plugging abandoned wells under their land. The committee recommends the Legislature provide more incentives to do so.

One recommendation is adding a fee onto the initial well construction application so funds are collected to help plug old wells



Amara Lopez

while new wells are constructed. Each year, approximately 30,000 new water wells are installed in Texas, according to a committee white paper. The committee also identified the importance of conducting a statewide survey to determine the severity of the issue.

Thompson said one of Texas' shortcomings in resource management is the lack of coordinated analysis on how much groundwater can be recovered, the cost of pumping and the potential failure of wells across the state.

"Groundwater districts, as local specialists, probably have a little bit of a feel for it, but no one has put together all of those (factors) for the state to really be able to look at this," Thompson said.

The challenge for the state will be administering the funds equitably and effectively, said Marc Friberg, deputy general manager for the Edwards Aquifer Authority. State agencies made recommendations in 2015 and 2019 to fund statewide water well plugging but were not approved. At least 30 bills related to water management have been filed since the start of the 89th Texas legislative session on Jan. 14.

"The issue has been recognized as a true issue in the state for our water supply (enough) that I think it should get more debate this session than it has in the past," Friberg said.