

SAWS denies Vista Ridge water wasted

Conservation district voices its concerns

By Scott Huddleston STAFF WRITER



Jerry Lara / Staff photographer

A worker helps install dome panels at a water tank at the Agua Vista Station in Stone Oak in October 2018. The 80-foot-tall tank will hold 10 million gallons of water from the Vista Ridge pipeline that brings water from Central Texas.



Bob Owen / Staff photographer

Audrey Housson, an engineer with Atkinson Construction, shows the tunnel boring machine used for the Vista Ridge water pipe in March 2019.

A Central Texas groundwater conservation district that oversees pumping of water through a 142-mile pipeline has voiced concern about potential “waste” by the San Antonio Water System.

But SAWS officials maintain the roughly 580 million gallons discharged into local creek beds from mid-April to June 12 was put to “beneficial use” for testing and flushing of water mains and other equipment for the massive Vista Ridge pipeline, which began operating this year.

Sidney Youngblood, chairman of the Post Oak Savannah Groundwater Conservation District, sent a letter Friday to the SAWS board, requesting the utility review its internal procedures “to ensure that such waste does not occur again.”

While the district doesn’t have regulatory authority over SAWS, it does regulate a permit held by a private company as part of the controversial public-private, \$2.8 billion Vista Ridge pipeline project, which will expand SAWS’ drinking water supply by about 20 percent, enough water to serve about 162,000 families.

Youngblood's letter followed a meeting Thursday of the district board, which has decision-making authority on permits for the Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer in Milam and Burleson counties, near College Station.

He said the board was "shocked" by reports that half the water earlier pumped through the pipeline to San Antonio had been discharged into the dry bed of Mud Creek, near the new Agua Vista Station close to Loop 1604 and U.S. 281 on the North Side.

"We desire only good stewardship in the resource that our board has been tasked with regulating with an eye on conservation," Youngblood said in the letter.

SAWS officials said they did not waste water, but were obligated under an agreement with the project's private consortium, including Blue Water Vista Ridge, which holds the permit overseen by the Post Oak district, to begin receiving water on April 15.

The pipeline began delivering about 20 million gallons daily — the least amount it could carry without compromising water quality at the wells in Burleson County.

SAWS officials were worried that if they distributed the new water to older parts of the system, which have galvanized metal pipes, some with internal iron oxide corrosion, the change from Edwards Aquifer water to the softer Carrizo-Wilcox aquifer could cause de-scaling, sending reddish water to local taps, causing a panic.

Steve Clouse, SAWS senior vice president and chief operating officer, was mindful of a 2014 public health crisis in Flint, Mich., where the city integrated river water into its supply as a cost-cutting measure, unwittingly producing lead-contaminated water that began flowing into people's homes.

"Our water would have probably been safe to drink if it was red in color. But just imagine the fear that everyone would've had," Clouse said.

About half the water was being chemically treated, disinfected, stored and distributed to a pump station, then delivered to homes and businesses in and around Stone Oak and Timberwood Park. The rest was used for testing and flushing lines, a routine maintenance practice to ensure drinking water quality, under a permit from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, SAWS officials said.

"We have followed what we're supposed to be doing. We're using best practices for integration of a new water source into a community," SAWS President and CEO Robert Puente said.

SAWS has since increased flows through the Vista Ridge pipeline to 35 million gallons daily and begun distributing the water to areas along and on both sides of U.S. 281,

between Loop 1604 and Loop 410. It will ramp up pipeline production to 45 million gallons by September, delivering the water farther south through its operations plants along the 281 corridor.

Puente said SAWS is preparing a formal response to the Post Oak Savannah district, but has spoken to officials there to ease their concerns. He said the matter has been exaggerated by “anti-growth” groups opposed the Vista Ridge project.

“To meet our water security for the next decades, we need this project,” Puente said.

One of those groups, the League of Independent Voters of Texas, is rallying support for a San Antonio petition drive seeking a city charter amendment that would cap the SAWS CEO’s salary, ensure strictly enforced term limits of SAWS board members and require an audit of major projects.

Supporters are seeking to put the amendment called the “SAWS Accountability Act” on the May 2021 ballot.

Linda Curtis, a Bastrop resident and volunteer executive director of the league, said the Vista Ridge project is one of a growing number of pipeline endeavors that are using “megapermits” that threaten groundwater supplies in Central Texas.

“This project, Vista Ridge, and the rogue municipal water utility, SAWS, are deforming the entire paradigm for groundwater management,” Curtis said during a recent conference call with critics of Vista Ridge.

The controversy surfaces less than two weeks after SAWS began limiting outdoor watering to once after in compliance with limits on permitted pumping that are now in effect from the Edwards Aquifer Authority.

The lawn-watering restrictions went into effect July 9, for the first time in nearly two years, after dry conditions lowered the Edwards Aquifer and resulted in diminished spring flows that sustain federally protected aquatic species.

The Vista Ridge project was a response to mounting pressure from San Antonio business leaders who saw the perpetual pumping constraints on the Edwards as a threat to economic growth. shuddleston@express-news.net | *Twitter:*

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