

## Water conservation will protect county's future

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Each year over much of the last decade, something has been happening in Fort Stockton that was unheard of for nearly half a century: Comanche Springs starts flowing again. As most Fort Stockton residents know, the spring that once earned the town the mantle of Spring City stopped flowing in the 1960s as groundwater pumping west of town intensified.

The water that would flow out of Comanche Springs starts as rain on the Glass Mountains, where it filters underground, flowing beneath the farms of Leon-Belding just west of Fort Stockton. Most of the water that isn't pumped in Leon-Belding ends up in caves beneath Fort Stockton and spring outlets in Rooney Park.

So why has Comanche Springs started flowing again during the winter months? The answer is water conservation. When farming acreage in Leon-Belding peaked in the 1970s, the spring only flowed after major rainfall events. But as the number of active wells declined—and as larger farming operations diversified their groundwater supplies—overall pumping in Comanche Springs' primary source declined. Over time, aquifer levels slowly recovered.

And beginning about a decade ago, irrigation pumps are shut off following the growing season, water levels are high enough for some of that water to flow out of Comanche Springs.

In 2019, Texas Water Trade began looking at the potential to prompt Comanche Springs back toward year-round flows. Our focus is on the potential for voluntary transactions with groundwater users in Leon-Belding to further enhance water conservation.

Through our program, we offer farmers financial incentives to enhance the efficiency of their irrigation systems. Less water required to grow the same crops is good for the aquifer and good for the farmer. Energy bills tell the story; it is not unusual for local farms to pay more than \$100,000 per month for electricity or natural gas to lift irrigation water out of the ground.

We also focus on shifting some water demands into underlying aquifers. In most of Leon-Belding, water qual-

ity in the Rustler and Capitan is as good or better than the Edwards-Trinity. Wells in those deeper aquifers are more expensive to drill, so we are evaluating opportunities for cost-sharing those investments for farms and for Fort Stockton, whose own drinking water comes from a wellfield in Leon-Belding.

To enable these investments in water conservation and reliability, Texas Water Trade has raised more than \$2 million—a mix of federal, state, corporate, foundation and individual contributions. Our first pilot transaction is underway in Leon-Belding: an effort with Belding Farms, the largest pecan producer in Texas, to implement high-efficiency sprinklers as an alternative to flood irrigation. This is just the beginning of what is possible.

As demands on the Edwards-Trinity Aquifer grow, our work is increasingly important. Midland, San Angelo and Abilene are planning their own supply project in Leon-Belding under a contract executed in 2020. Those cities plan to pump 9 billion gallons a year from a wellfield about a mile from Fort Stockton's own drinking water wellfield—roughly 8 times more than Fort Stockton uses today. Without serious investments in conservation and supply alternatives like Texas Water Trade is enabling, the Edwards-Trinity in Leon-Belding would see roughly a 25% increase in total demand.

What the future will hold for Comanche Springs is still unknown. But with every gallon we save through voluntary agreements, we build a more resilient future for one of the region's most important water supplies. By supporting commonsense water conservation, Pecos County residents have the chance to protect their aquifer for the long-term—ensuring that farming, industry, and cities can thrive well into the future. The proposition is the same for Midland, San Angelo and Abilene, who benefit no less from our work.

On Saturday, March 12, we will be hosting the first annual SpringsFest, a celebration of Comanche Springs. The event, from 1:30-5 p.m. at the Annie Riggs Museum, is an opportunity for people to learn more about the springs and to share their own stories of Spring City. It is also a chance to meet the Texas Water Trade team and to learn more about why we care about Pecos County's water future.