

Voluntary Irrigation Suspension Program Option (VISPO)

BACKGROUND

It is apparent there is a direct relationship between the amount of groundwater withdrawals from the Edwards Aquifer during severe drought and the flow at Comal and San Marcos springs. Consequently, a Voluntary Irrigation Suspension Program Option (VISPO) has been proposed to reduce aquifer pumping demands during specified critical periods in order to improve aquifer levels and protect spring flows, the protected species, and their habitats.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The VISPO is a voluntary program open to participation primarily to eligible holders of irrigation water rights from the Edwards Aquifer Authority (EAA) in Atascosa, Bexar, Comal, Hays, Medina and Uvalde counties who are willing to suspend exercising all or a portion of their authorized withdrawal rights in exchange for financial compensation. The Edwards Aquifer Authority (EAA) will determine, by October 1, if the aquifer has declined to a level at or below 635 feet above mean sea level (msl) in the J-17 index well in San Antonio (the trigger), indicating that the program participants (Participants) must suspend withdrawals in the next following calendar year. Each Participant will be paid a standby fee each year of the program term regardless of aquifer level or condition and will be paid an implementation fee equal to an additional three times the standby fee each year the program requires suspension of withdrawals.

PROGRAM ELEMENTS

Target Volume

The volume goal for the VISPO program is 40,000 acre-feet. The procedure for achieving the target volume is to aggressively pursue enrollment from Atascosa, Bexar, Comal and Hays counties first. Then the balance of the target volume goal will be divided between Medina and Uvalde counties, with a 15,000 acre-foot cap for each county. In review of enrollment applications for Medina and Uvalde counties, those choosing the 10-year option will be given first priority. The VISPO program will leave water in the aquifer for the benefit of springflow and not to allow withdrawals by another party. Therefore, all permitted irrigation water rights (base and unrestricted) will be accepted in the program. However, the financial offering for the program is aimed at base irrigation groundwater rights. All modeling scenarios assume total permitted Edwards Aquifer withdrawal rights are pumped when aquifer or spring conditions allow. Further, irrigators will be allowed to enroll a portion of their water rights in the program if withdrawals are monitored by real time automated meters.

Voluntary Participation

It should be clearly understood that VISPO participation is completely voluntary and that electing not to participate or declining to enroll will not result in any consequences to an irrigation water right holder other than the required withdrawal reductions specified by the EAA.

Currently, the all Edwards Aquifer water right holders must reduce their permitted withdrawals by up to 40% currently under Stage IV drought restrictions and 44% under the proposed Stage V drought restrictions. The financial incentives offered to enrollees in the program should encourage participation. In recognition of the fact that a significant amount of irrigated acreage is rented or leased land, the program will require that in any situation in which the landowner is not the operator, authorization and payment instructions must be received from both parties.

Program Trigger and Estimated Implementation Frequency

The program will be triggered if the level in the J-17 index well in San Antonio is at or below 635 feet msl on the trigger date, October 1. The October 1 date was chosen to provide irrigators, and ancillary businesses affected by the decisions made by irrigators, with ample time to make cropping decisions. Announcing implementation of the program on that date will result in a complete suspension of withdrawals of the enrolled water for each program participant for the next following calendar year, beginning on January 1.

Implementation at this elevation will maintain adequate protection for the endangered species and also means suspension will be implemented less often. As a result, participating permit holders will have greater access to their permits. Examination of historical water levels for J-17 index well on October 1 indicates that the program would have triggered approximately 6% of the time. However, groundwater and aquifer computer models using current authorized pumping amounts predict VISPO being triggered approximately 30% of the time.

Estimated Program Benefits and Program Term

Preliminary analysis by HDR Engineering, Inc. indicates that a VISPO with 40,000 acre-feet participation will significantly improve springflow at Comal Springs during the most severe drought. Information available from agricultural interests suggests that most farming arrangements between landowners and producers are for five-year terms. Therefore, there will be two VISPO options, a five-year program and a ten-year program. The ten-year program will have additional financial incentives to encourage enrollment in the longer-term program

Estimated VISPO Costs

The VISPO will have two programmatic offerings; a five-year a ten-year program. Both programs will have an annual standby fee and an implementation fee equal to three times the annual standby fee as follows:

- Five-year program
 - standby fee of \$50/acre-foot that increases 1.5% per year
 - implementation fee of \$150/acre-foot that also increases 1.5% per year.
- Ten-year program
 - standby fee of \$57.50/acre-foot for years 1-5 and a step-up to \$70.20/acre-foot for years 6-10
 - implementation fee of \$172.50/acre-foot for years 1-5 and a step-up to \$210.60/acre-foot for years 6-10.

Determining the total cost of the program is complicated because expenses are determined by the amount of water enrolled, which program (the five-year or ten-year program) is selected and the number of times the program is implemented.