

TEXAS HILL COUNTRY

## 'The new normal?' In Central Texas, the drought just won't let up

Even with huge rain events, 2025 was still a below-average year for the San Antonio area. As the drought passes five years, the forecast isn't getting better.

Like most Central Texas lakes, Canyon Lake's water level is well below its historical norm as drought continues to drag on. The lake is currently about 60% full.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

By **Liz Teitz**, Staff Writer

Feb 13, 2026





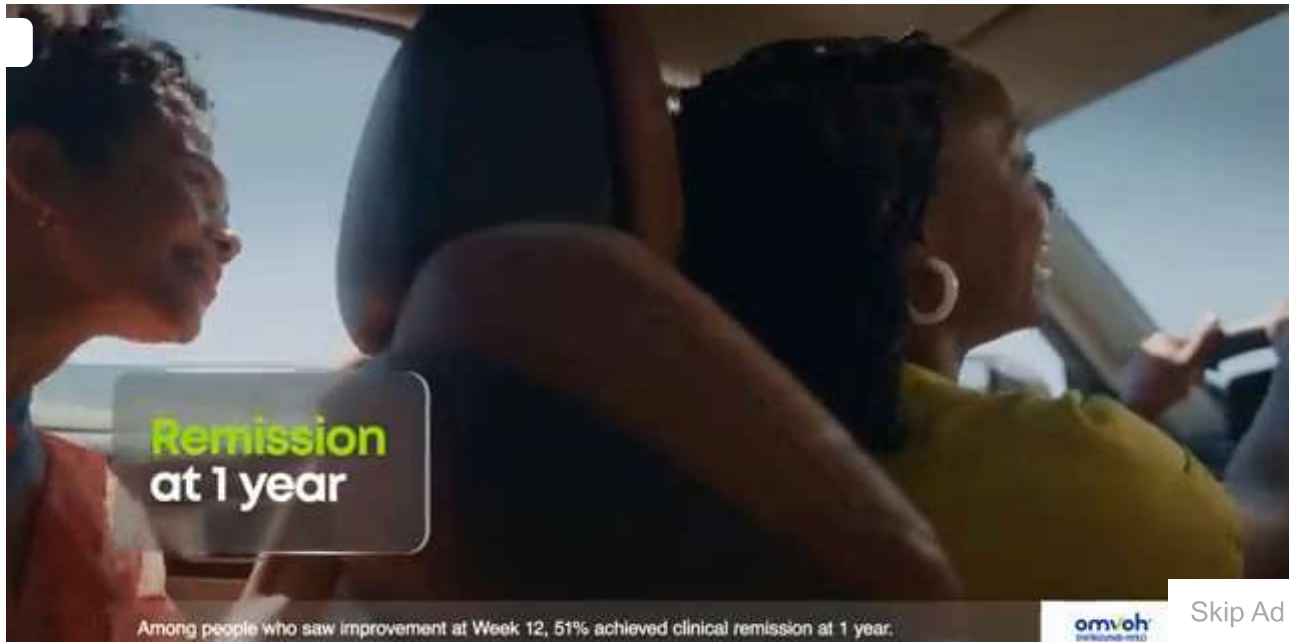
Listen Now: 'The new normal?' In Central Texas, the drought.

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KERR COUNTY — Travis Linscomb stood ankle-deep in Bear Creek, stretching a measuring tape across the clear, shallow water.



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He slowly worked his way across the narrow waterway methodically, using a velocimeter to record the speed of the water as it flowed past on its way to the North Fork of the Guadalupe River.

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Bear Creek is one of several sites where Linscomb, a natural resources specialist for the Upper Guadalupe River Authority, collects quarterly spring flow measurements.

The Guadalupe rises from springs in Kerr County, then winds its way to Canyon Lake, then flows southeast until it reaches the coast. At gauges all along its banks, from Kerrville to the Gulf, the river these days is flowing at far below its normal rate, a sign of the ongoing drought and insufficient rainfall.

That's still true despite the huge amounts of rain that wreaked havoc on July 4, sending the Guadalupe River surging to record highs. The river quickly returned to its below-normal flows, where it has remained — just like many other water sources around Central Texas.

Canyon Lake is less than two-thirds full, Medina Lake still sits below 5% and the Edwards Aquifer, San Antonio's largest water source, started the year with its third-lowest New Year's Day measurement in nearly a century of record-keeping.

If you think of the region's water supplies as a bank account, the years of below-average rainfall and unrelenting drought have drained the balance.

The deficit is now too big to be erased by a few storms, even catastrophic ones.

“We can have some normal years and be just fine, but we’re spending what we earn,” said Paul Bertetti, the Edwards Aquifer Authority’s senior director of aquifer science research and modeling. “We don’t get a chance to have a lot of savings.”

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Travis Linscomb, a natural resources specialist with the Upper Guadalupe River Authority, uses a measurement tool to determine the speed of the water flowing through Bear Creek toward the North Fork of the Guadalupe River on Jan. 29.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News



Travis Linscomb, a natural resources specialist with the Upper Guadalupe River Authority, uses a measurement tool to determine the speed of the water flowing through Bear Creek toward the North Fork of the Guadalupe River on Jan. 29.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

## 'Normal doesn't help us'

In June and July, heavy rainfall brought catastrophe to Central Texas. In San Antonio, 13 people died on June 12 when heavy rains created a flash flood that washed cars off roadways. Then on July 4, 119 people died in Kerr County when the Guadalupe River surged out of its banks, sweeping through homes, RV parks and summer camps.

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Despite those two huge rain events, 2025 was still a drier-than-normal year in the San Antonio area, by historical standards.

In an average year, San Antonio gets about 32 inches of rainfall. The National Weather Service uses 30-year increments for that calculation, so the current average is based on data from 1990 through 2020.

Only once since 2019 has the city reached that average-year level, building up a rainfall deficit that compounds year after year.

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In 2025, the National Weather Service recorded about 27 inches of rain in San Antonio — closer to normal, but still firmly in drought.

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The same is true in the Hill Country, where 2025's rainfall didn't make up for recent dry years.

Kerrville averages slightly less precipitation than San Antonio, about 28 inches per year. Even with July's catastrophic storm, 2025 ended at about 26 inches of rain there.

"Normal doesn't help us," Bertetti said. "What we need is some big, above-average years to fill up the tank."

To catch up, Central Texas needs not just substantial rainfall, but at the right time and in the right places, to recharge the aquifers and keep the spring-fed rivers flowing.

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The best scenario is rain that falls slowly, with enough time for the dry ground to absorb it, instead of the water immediately running off and causing flooding.

“It’s not necessarily about the amount of rain but rather the type of rain,” said Shelby Taber, the Upper Guadalupe River Authority's natural resources manager. “It’s much more important to get those long, slow rainfalls, as opposed to quick flash floods.”

It also matters where the rain falls. Aquifers rely on rain in the contributing and recharge zones, where water can enter the ground through fractures in the surface.

For the Edwards Aquifer, those zones are to the north and west of San Antonio. The June 12 rainfall, and others in the city over the summer, fell too far east to make much of a difference in the Edwards Aquifer. The July 4 storm dropped the most rain solely over the Guadalupe’s watershed, where it flowed quickly downstream without much soaking into the ground.

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“Normally, historically, our droughts have been broken by pretty significant floods,” said Dave Mauk, general manager of the Bandera County River Authority and Groundwater District. “This one didn’t do it. That’s how long we’ve been in a deficit.”

**ALSO READ:** [SAWS planning \\$100M-plus expansion of underground water storage system](#)



Debris from the July 4 Guadalupe River flood collects below the boat ramp at Potters Creek Park at Canyon Lake on July 8. The historic amount of rainfall that produced the devastating flood did little to end the area’s drought.

Marvin Pfeiffer/San Antonio Express-News

## 'Under a lot of stress'

The Edwards Aquifer has been “under a lot of stress” for at least the past five years and is at “extremely low” levels currently, Bertetti said.

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The aquifer authority's J-17 well in Bexar County, one of its two main monitoring wells, is currently measuring about 628 feet above sea level, which is about 40 feet below the historical average for this time of year.

The agency has records for that well dating to 1932. The first measurement of 2026, 629 feet on Jan. 1, was the third-lowest start to a year ever documented. The only years lower were 2025, at just under 627 feet, and 1957, during the historic drought of the 1950s, when the year started at 626.6 feet.

That 1950s drought is considered the worst in the state's history. It is known as the "drought of record" and is used for statewide water planning.

Back-to-back years of such low water levels are "particularly concerning," Bertetti said. "We're down close to those levels that we had in the record drought, and those conditions continue to persist."

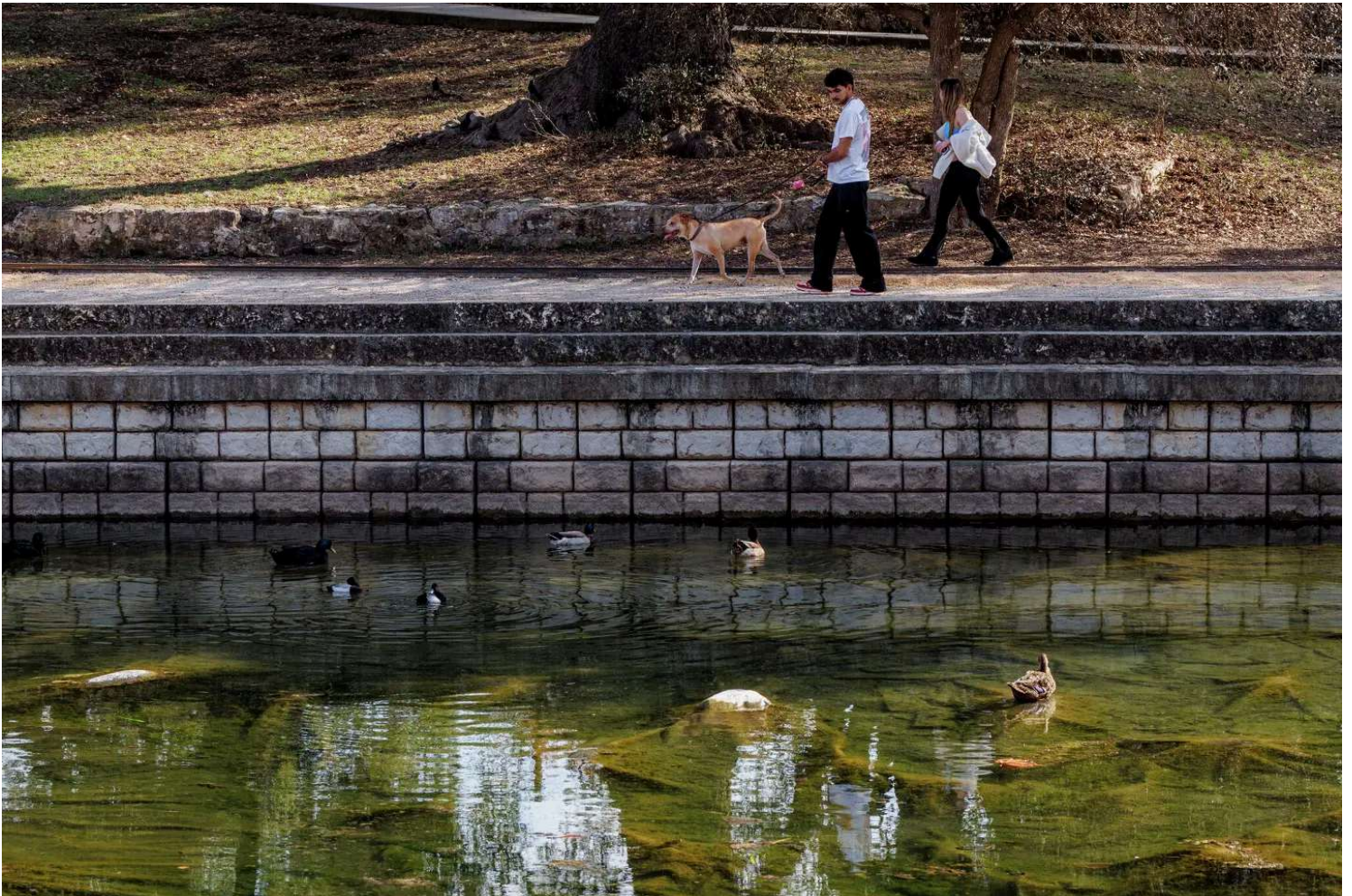
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The springs that rise from the Edwards Aquifer are also flowing at below-average rates. The flow at Comal Springs in New Braunfels is at about a quarter of the average there, while San Marcos Springs are less than half the typical rate.



The low water level is evident on the Comal River at Landa Park in New Braunfels on Feb. 3. Years of unrelenting drought have left many South Texas streams, lakes and aquifers at far below their historical norms.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

The aquifer authority's San Antonio Pool, a seven-county area, is in Stage 4 restrictions, meaning aquifer users such as San Antonio Water System are limited to pumping just 60% of their permitted amounts of water from the aquifer.

In Uvalde County, where the aquifer authority uses a different monitor well, the pumping restrictions are even more severe, at Stage 5.

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Water levels are also below normal in the Trinity Aquifer, another vital water source for much of Central Texas.

That groundwater system runs throughout much of the Hill Country, including in Kerr, Bandera, Kendall and Comal counties. It's considered one of the "most extensive and highly used groundwater resources in Texas" by the Texas Water Development Board.

Unlike the Edwards, which functions more like an underground bathtub, the Trinity is made up of different layers of formations that hold water, resulting in less movement of water throughout the aquifer and slower recharge from rainfall.

In Bandera County, well water levels are declining, Mauk said, though the nature of the aquifer means some areas are holding up better than others. Monitoring wells in the Lower Trinity are averaging one foot lower than a year ago, and Middle Trinity wells about two feet lower.

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Other groundwater agencies around the Hill Country are also seeing deficits. In Kendall County, the Cow Creek Groundwater Conservation District reported that water levels are about 16 feet below the January average, and in Kerr County, the Headwaters Groundwater Conservation District remains in severe drought status because of well levels there.





The water level is well below normal on the Comal River in New Braunfels on Feb. 3. Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

## 'Persistent, chronic and punishing'

Gauges all along the Guadalupe River, from its headwaters to the Gulf, tell the same story.

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“Stream flows continue to be well below median throughout the basin,” Charlie Hickman, executive manager of engineering for the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority, said at a recent board of trustees meeting. The agency manages the river from Kendall County to the coast, while the Upper Guadalupe River Authority manages it in Kerr County.

At both Hunt and Spring Branch, the river is flowing at about one-third of its typical rates, based on decades of data.

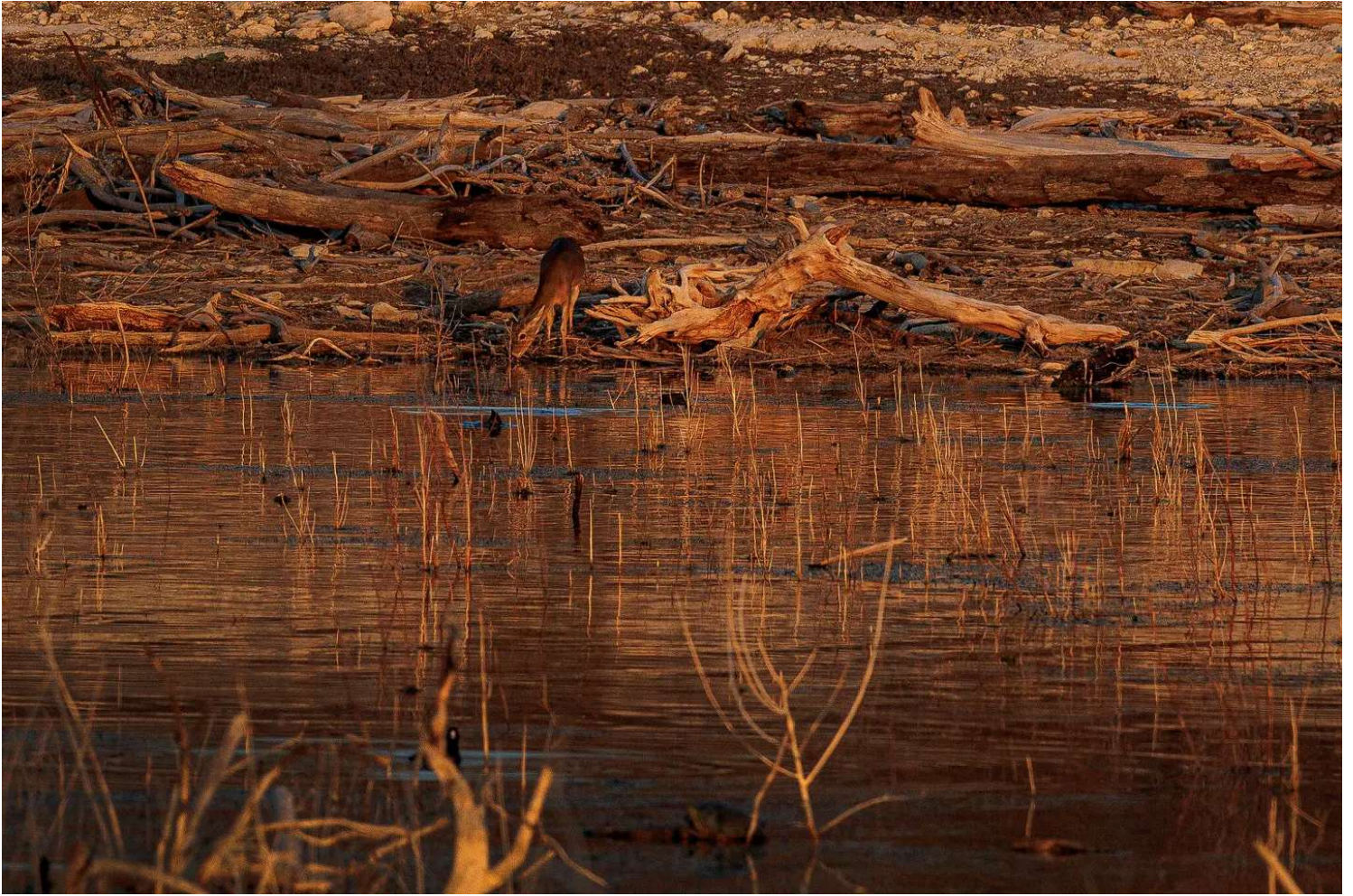
At current levels, the environment is still livable for most of the wildlife in the river, Taber said. But if flow continues falling in the summer, fish and mussels are threatened. Other water quality issues, like bacteria, also become more likely.

Low flow can also cause vegetation along the river to die, she said, affecting another key part of the ecosystem. Those plants can hold water, storing it for dry times and helping sustain the environment during drought. The July flood destroyed much of that vegetation, leaving less of a buffer if water levels keep falling.

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A deer drinks water from Canyon Lake on Feb. 12. Like most Central Texas bodies of water, Canyon Lake's water level is well below its historical norm as drought continues to drag on. The lake is currently about 60% full.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

The Guadalupe River's low flow is also causing lower levels at Canyon Lake in Comal County. In the first month after the July flood, the surface level rose about 15 feet, but by early August it had started falling again, and the lake remains about 61% full.

In an average year, more than 250,000 acre-feet of water flow into Canyon Lake. In 2025, the river authority measured less than half that average, at 122,156 acre-feet, Hickman said. An acre-foot, which is about 326,000 gallons, is a common unit of measurement in the water industry, referring to the water needed to cover 1 acre in 1 foot of water.

“Even with that major flood, it was still a below average year in terms of stream flow up there,” Hickman said.

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The Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority is required to release water from Canyon Dam at rates determined by river flows, state and federal permits and downstream water rights. Canyon Lake is losing more water from releases and evaporation than the amount of water flowing into the lake.

West of San Antonio, the Medina River's current flow is only about a third of its median near Bandera. Downstream, Medina Lake is just over 4% full, and its surface water level is more than 85 feet below normal.

The reservoir saw some improvement from last summer's rains, climbing about 13 feet in July, but it has dropped back down since. The lake hasn't been more than 10% full since August 2022.

“In our area,” Mauk said, “this drought is persistent, chronic and punishing,”

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## More restrictions coming?

The coming months don't hold much promise for substantial relief from the drought, experts say.

“Unfortunately, the intermediate climate outlook suggests that things are unlikely to get better, at least over the next couple of months,” Bertetti said.

February, March and April are more likely to see below-normal rainfall in San Antonio and the Hill Country, along with above-average temperatures that increase demand and accelerate evaporation, according to the National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center.

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That could bring even more severe restrictions on water users this year.

The Edwards Aquifer Authority briefly implemented Stage 5 restrictions for the San Antonio Pool for the first time last spring. There's no way to know yet whether that will happen in 2026, but it's a possibility, Bertetti said.

"Any time we're this close, there's always a chance we'll get there," Bertetti said.

Those restrictions are intended to protect all the aquifer's users. That includes the endangered species that rely on the springs, who legally must be protected, as well as large and small users alike, from huge utilities like SAWS to individual farmers whose private wells are at risk of going dry.

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Even if water is still available at lower levels, deepening wells can cost tens of thousands of dollars, and pumping water from the aquifer takes more energy at lower depths, Bertetti said.

“If we wanted to mine the system and pump as much as we can, there still is water for those who can afford to get to it,” Bertetti said — but that would inevitably leave some users behind and significantly increase costs. “Trying to keep it at the best level possible is good for everyone.”

Canyon Lake could also return to mandatory water curtailments for wholesale customers, which are only triggered when the reservoir drops below 49% full; until then, drought measures only call for voluntary conservation.

The Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority's six-month outlook doesn't anticipate those restrictions yet, “but it's something we do need to be thinking about for the summer of 2026 potentially if we don't have an improvement in conditions,” Hickman said.

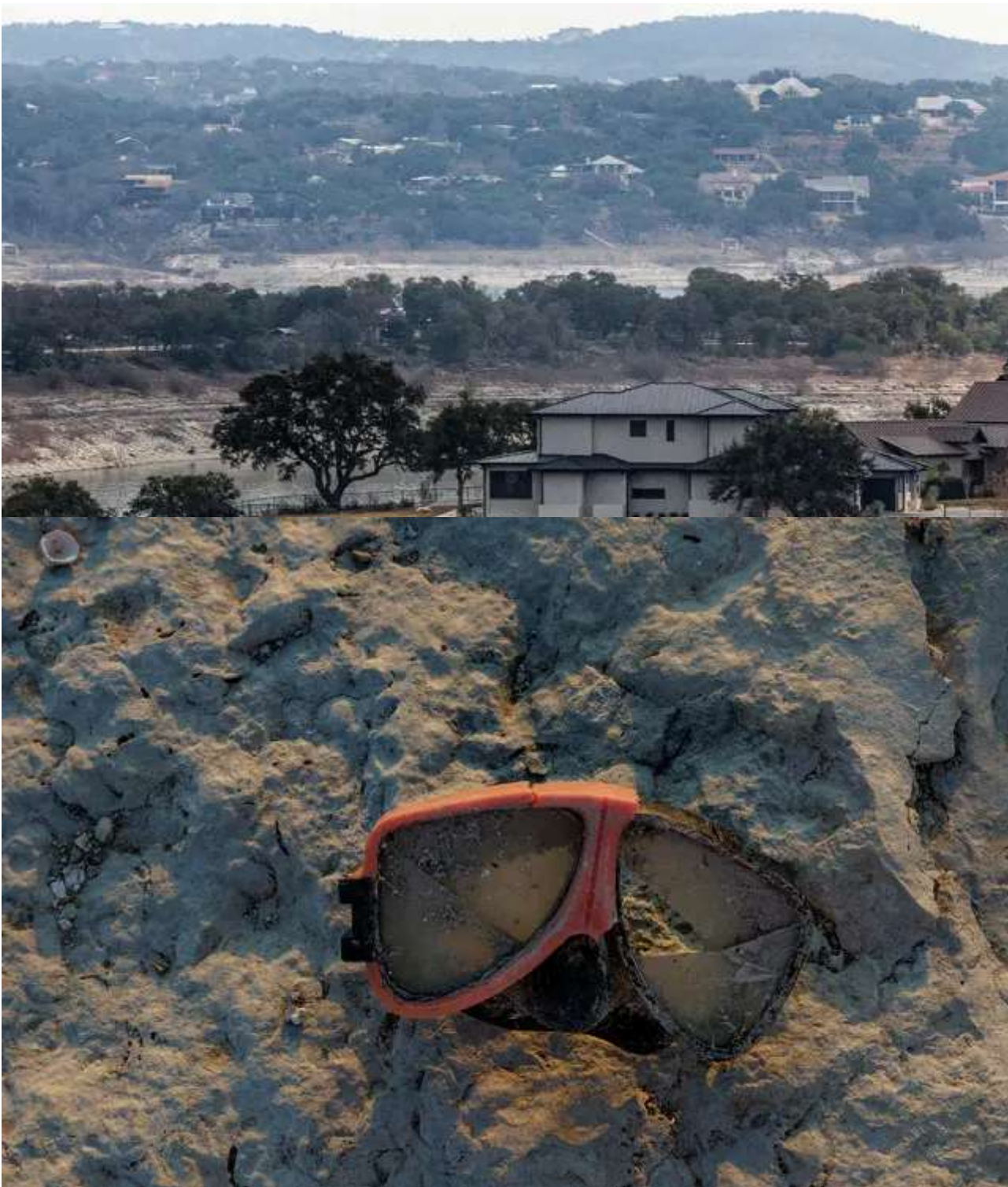
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For water suppliers like SAWS and city utilities, that means carefully managing existing supplies and often, looking for other sources.



Canyon Lake hovers around 60% capacity, exposing dried banks and remnants that were formerly hidden under water. Persistent drought and lower water levels means tighter restrictions are on the horizon with less water for things like landscaping and recreation. Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News (2)

## **'Is this the new normal?'**

SAWS has relied heavily on its aquifer storage and recovery program, in which water from the Edwards Aquifer is pumped back underground to save for times of

need. But that only works when SAWS has enough Edwards Aquifer water available to store, Bertetti said, and last year its permits were cut by almost 40% due to drought restrictions.

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The utility plans to spend more than \$100 million expanding its aquifer storage plant, and is also budgeting to increase desalination, or treating brackish water from another aquifer, the Wilcox, to make it safe for drinking. Some of SAWS' other water sources are also being affected by drought. SAWS has a contract for water from the Trinity Aquifer but hasn't been able to receive the full amount in several years due to low water levels, SAWS' chief financial officer Doug Evanson told the utility's board recently.

For smaller utilities, such as the city of Kerrville, the drought can be even more difficult to navigate.

“The real challenge is going to be understanding, is this the new normal?” said Stuart Barron, who recently retired as Kerrville's executive director of public works and engineering.

The city's primary water source is the Guadalupe River, though it also has wells in the Lower Trinity aquifer and its own aquifer storage site. Under normal conditions, the city tries to get 85% to 90% of its water from the Guadalupe, he said, then looks to groundwater and stored water to meet peak demand.

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“As the river flow becomes less and less, we start ratcheting back,” Barron said, pulling more from the ground and less from the river. That was also the case last summer, when flooding damaged the city's water treatment plant and it had to halt use of river water completely until it was repaired.

“On paper, we have more than enough water for even long-term growth,” he said. But with prolonged drought, lower water levels and increased demand, “you really start asking questions about, 'is that enough water for pumping every day?'"

There's no question that there's enough for indoor use, he said, but irrigation use for lawns puts pressure on those supplies.



Like most Central Texas lakes, Canyon Lake's water level is well below its historical norm as drought continues to drag on. The lake is currently about 60% full.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

## Effects of climate change

Planning for prolonged drought will be vital for the region, as models predict both drought and flooding will worsen in the coming decades due to climate change.

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“The atmosphere has been warming and, by all projections, will continue to warm,” said Jay Banner, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin’s Jackson School of Geosciences.

Warming the surface of the oceans causes evaporation, putting more water into the atmosphere, so the clouds hold more water and ultimately result in bigger rain events. That same warming over land robs soil of its moisture, he said, causing longer and more intense droughts.

Hotter temperatures — which also worsen drought and strain water supplies — are also expected, in both the short- and long-term future.

A 2024 report by Texas State Climatologist John Nielsen-Gammon predicted that by 2036, the number of 100-degree days will quadruple compared to the 1970s and 1980s.

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By the end of the century, climate models project that under current emission conditions, the San Antonio region will have about 120 days over 100 degrees per year, Banner said, compared to about 40 per year currently.

## **Worst drought ever?**

As the current Texas drought drags on, some experts are starting to question whether it might reach the level of the infamous 1950s drought.

That's a question that can only be answered after the fact, the aquifer authority's Bertetti said, not while it's still happening. But it's safe to say that, in historical records, "it's easily the second-worst drought," he said.

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The historical comparison is difficult to make in part because of population growth. The Edwards Aquifer is more regulated than it was in the 1950s, but there are far more people relying on it than there were 70 years ago. That makes it harder for those water sources to recover from below-average rainfall, Bertetti said.

“As we continue to have very low replenishment of the aquifer systems, it’s very difficult for us to recover and catch up,” he said.

Mauk said he considers the current drought to be worse than the 1950s, based on the length of the drought, the water levels and the demand on water supplies.

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“The whole watershed is struggling,” he said. “And it does not look like it’s going to abate any time soon.”

Feb 13, 2026



**Liz Teitz**  
REPORTER



Liz Teitz covers environmental news and the Hill Country for the San Antonio Express-News. She writes about the San Antonio Water System, news in New Braunfels and Comal County and water issues around Central Texas. She can be reached at [liz.teitz@express-news.net](mailto:liz.teitz@express-news.net).

Liz joined the Express-News in June 2023. She has been a reporter for eight years, covering housing, government, education and other topics for the Ouray County Plaindealer, Hearst Connecticut Media Group and the Beaumont Enterprise. Liz grew up in Rhode Island and graduated from Georgetown University.