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## **San Antonio Gives Up on Groundwater Plan.**

More than three years after San Antonio Water System asked the private sector to develop plans for a new water supply for the growing, thirsty region, the utility has decided not to use any of them.

Instead, SAWS announced on Thursday, it will shelve three groundwater pumping projects that had made it to the final round of consideration in favor of expanding existing plans to desalinate brackish water in southern Bexar County.

One of the three proposals includes a controversial plan to pipe 16 billion gallons of water each year to San Antonio from underneath Val Verde County in West Texas. The plan had generated fierce opposition from water users along the Rio Grande, whose groundwater-fed flow could have been affected.

But the Val Verde County project may have actually been the most feasible, at least from a legal standpoint, because no groundwater conservation district exists in that county. The other two proposals San Antonio was considering were deemed unfeasible because they lie within groundwater districts that could restrict pumping in the future. The utility said it was not worth paying tens of millions of dollars for infrastructure that may ultimately not have water to deliver.

"Groundwater law in Texas leaves too much uncertainty and risk for the private and public sectors," said Robert Puente, the president of SAWS. "I hope that the proposers and cities across the state will join SAWS in calling for the Legislature to change the law so Texans can build projects to meet growing future demand."

The move came as a surprise to John Littlejohn, founder of the Val Verde Water Company, who had submitted the proposal to pump groundwater from Val Verde County. Asked on Thursday whether he would try to sell the water to another city, he said he would have to weigh his options.

It was also a surprise to San Antonio officials who had been told by SAWS last year that their residents would likely have to pay at least 10 percent more for water in the short term to finance such groundwater pumping projects.

"It just goes to show you how quickly things change," said SAWS spokesman Greg Flores. "We are conserving water better than we had planned, which means we can stretch our current resources out further."

He added that a desalination plant SAWS plans to build could also treat more water than the utility had originally thought. The plant had been expected to provide 9 billion gallons of water each year, but Flores said SAWS may now be able to treat more than twice that amount.

Still, that won't be easy. SAWS had planned to pump brackish groundwater from southern Bexar County, where no groundwater conservation district exists. To expand the capacity of the desalination plant, the utility will have to increase its pumping area to include land governed by the

Evergreen Underground Water Conservation District, which has resisted SAWS' efforts to take its brackish groundwater.

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