

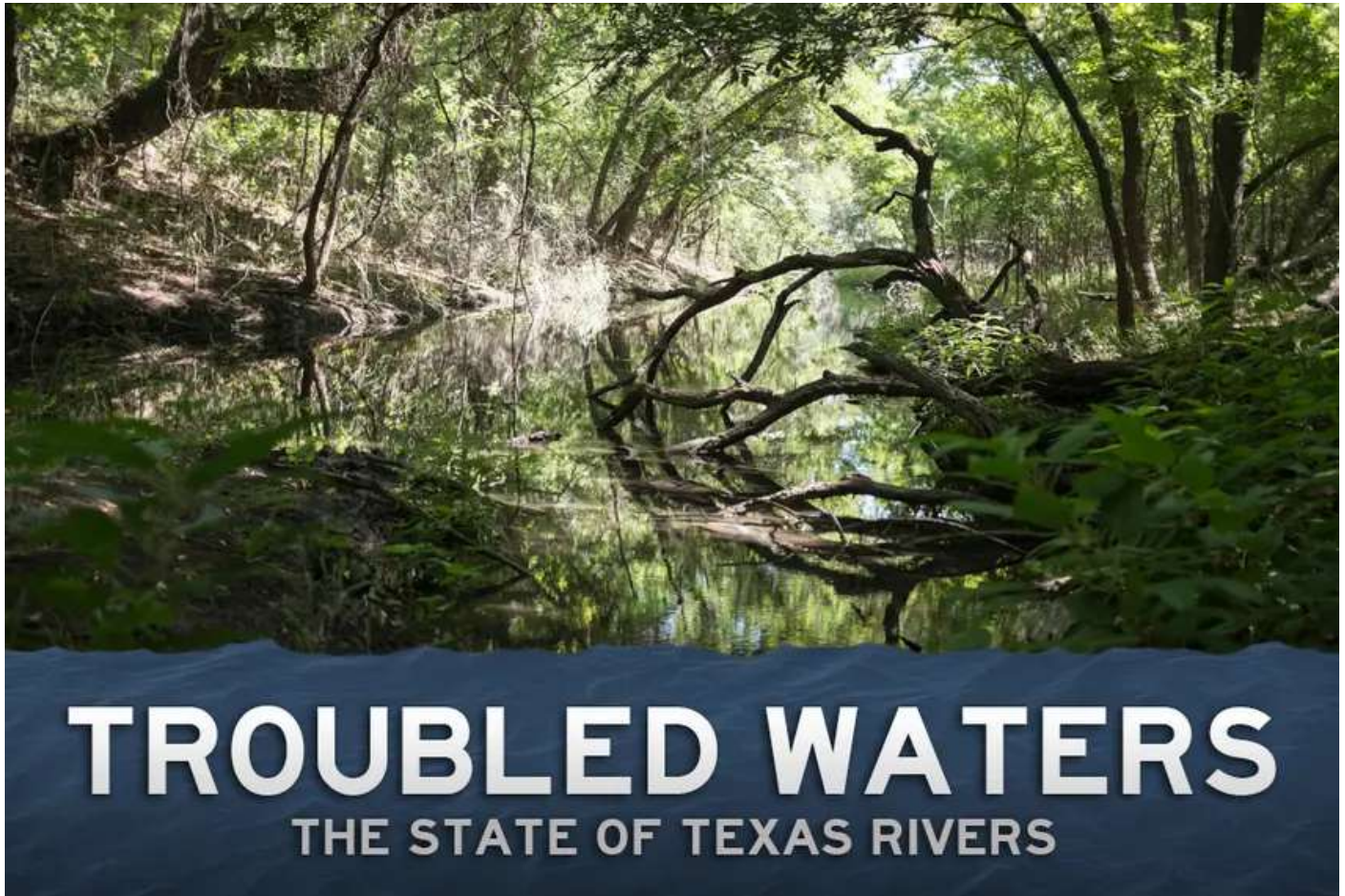


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# Debate Builds Over How to Save San Saba River

About 140 miles long, the San Saba River in Central Texas is not considered one of the state's major waterways, but it illustrates — in a state still dealing with a serious drought — the sensitivities surrounding the use of a limited resource.

BY REEVE HAMILTON JULY 19, 2013 6 AM CENTRAL



Spencer Selvidge

## TROUBLED WATERS

*Six years ago, state leaders launched an effort to better manage the health of Texas' rivers. But environmental advocates fear that ecology still takes a back seat as legislators fret about having*

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MENARD — About two miles beyond the entrance to Griffith Thomas' Block House Ranch in Central Texas' Mason County, a rock-strewn road dips down and comes to what is supposed to be the San Saba River. There is no water to speak of, only a cluster of stagnant pools on either side of the road.

In the first week of July, Thomas filed a priority call with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, requesting that it restrict water use upstream so the flow could return on his ranch. He and his neighbors made similar demands last year, which were denied, and the year before, which were granted.

“We’ve been trying to get something done about this for over 10 years,” he said.

The struggle over water management of the increasingly dry San Saba may not be new, but the debate over whether the irrigators upstream need to be monitored more closely has heated up this summer. In April, the San Saba ranked third on the list of the country’s most endangered rivers according to American Rivers, a national conservation group.

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Jessie Thomas-Blate, the coordinator of the endangered rivers list, said that one of the priority criteria for making the list was a looming decision that “could make or break” the river in the coming year.

Members of the nonprofit group Friends of the San Saba, of which Thomas is one, nominated the river for the endangered list, saying that the pivotal choice for the state was whether to appoint a watermaster.

A watermaster monitors stream flows and water use and makes determinations about the proper use of water-rights holders. Proponents of appointing one believe it would help curb what American Rivers described as “wasteful water use and unregulated pumping” in Menard, where the overwhelming number of irrigation water rights along the upper San Saba are held. Residents there view the prospect of a watermaster as an unnecessary and intrusive burden.

A bill filed during the regular session by state Rep. J.D. Sheffield, R-Gatesville, would have expanded the scope of the Concho River watermaster’s duties to include the San Saba.

He ultimately decided not to push the idea.

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“We found it to be a very volatile issue with a lot of history,” Sheffield said. “We would need a lot of time to look into it thoroughly, and we didn’t have it.”

Like most of the entries on the American Rivers list, the San Saba presents itself as a classic tragedy of the commons.

“The problem in a lot of these situations is that it’s not one person that’s causing a problem. It’s a collective problem,” Thomas-Blate said. “Unless everyone that’s part of the problem starts to take their little piece of responsibility for it, it becomes difficult to really deal with it.”

To irrigate crops using surface water, which belongs to the state, one must pay for a water right. Those rights are prioritized based on when each one was first granted. State law, however, says that the needs of people like Thomas who do not have water rights but require the river for domestic or livestock use, trump even the most senior water rights.

But only water-rights holders would have to pay the salary of a watermaster. According to the environmental commission, a stand-alone watermaster for the San Saba would cost nearly \$228,000 in its first year and almost \$166,000 in subsequent years. If an existing watermaster’s duties were expanded, the cost

for the San Saba watershed would be almost \$113,000 the first year followed by about \$77,000 the next.

There is little appetite for a watermaster among the residents of Menard, a town with such a notorious independent streak that a history of the city bears the title “The Free State of Menard.”

“A watermaster would just be a lot of expense, a lot of bureaucracy, and it wouldn’t accomplish anything,” said Caroline Runge, the consulting manager of the Menard County Underground Water District. “I can pretty categorically state we are not overpumping our permits.”

The San Saba, Runge would be the first to say, is not what it once was.

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“I’ve never seen it this low,” she said, standing next to the river’s trickling headwaters near Fort McKavett. “But it’s obviously not because of our pumping.”

Runge expressed concerns about groundwater pumping in neighboring Schleicher County taking water out of the aquifer before it reaches the springs that feed the river. But Jon Cartwright, manager of the Plateau Underground Water Conservation and Supply District in Schleicher County, said, “I’m very skeptical that there’s any pumping here that’s making any significant impact on that.”

One major point of contention is an irrigation ditch that diverts water from the river starting about five miles west of Menard, winds through the town center and, theoretically, returns water to the river five miles east of town. It is owned by the Menard Irrigation Company, which is made up of local shareholders.

Andrew Roll, a farmer on the eastern edge of Menard, said the part of the canal that ran through his family’s property had been dry for about three years.

“I feel for them,” Roll said of the people farther downstream. “I can understand their complaints, but I can’t see how it’s coming from our usage.”

The commission has been called out multiple times in recent years to investigate water-use complaints. In 2012, agency representatives expressed concerns that the measurement of the water flowing through the ditch was not taken until more than two miles beyond the initial diversion point, resulting in reports that underrepresented how much water was being diverted.

The matter has not been settled. “Innocent until proved guilty,” said Runge, though she acknowledged that in addition to some heavy rains, clearing vegetation near the ditch and other improvements — projects that would require financing — could help increase flows.

The commission could appoint a watermaster without legislation, though they have not done so. The Friends of the San Saba group continues to push for one but appears open to other options. “My approach is shoot for Mars and hope you land on the moon,” Thomas said.

The ultimate resolution, if one is reached, could prove instructive for others throughout Texas.

As Sheffield noted, “Everyone in rural Texas understands that there are only going to be more fights around water in the future.”

*This story is part of the Texas Tribune's "Troubled Waters" series, examining the state of Texas' rivers. Find the rest of the stories and a map of the rivers in the series [here](#).*

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