

Water

N E W S

Helotes Fire Provides Extreme Challenges in Balancing Water Quality and Air Quality

SAWS Complies with State Directive, Still Monitors Wells

It's hard to believe that the Helotes Mulch Fire ignited on December 24, 2006 – three months ago! While the fire in the huge mound of debris started out as an oddity, it evolved into a serious health threat for residents near Helotes, and a challenge to the city's water supply.

Since January SAWS has provided water for firefighting efforts by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. When wells near the fire started exhibiting contamination, SAWS called upon water supply agreements to limit the water placed on the fire.

As the size of the pile was reduced, digging below ground level revealed additional challenges. SAWS advocated a non-water method and paid to bring in a huge 200 foot, 2 1/2 ton crane that could reach out over the pit and pull out buckets of burning debris. But using the crane stirred up additional smoke and ash, prompting TCEQ to declare an air quality emergency. The crane operation was halted, and water was again used directly on the burning pile.



Contaminated private wells (sample at left) started showing up soon after firefighting efforts started, and worsened as time progressed (sample at right).

Since the crane was the only other available option considered, limited use of water was determined to be the safest and fastest solution.

(continued on pg.2)



SAWS workers, Sal Gallegos, Jacob Gallegos, and Joe Ramirez adjust flow of water to fight the fire.

SAWS to BexarMet Wastewater Customers: Welcome to our Billing Statements!

Water News is happy to welcome about 60,000 new readers! SAWS wastewater customers who have been billed by BexarMet in the past are now receiving SAWS bills.

SAWS wants to provide all our customers with great service while keeping rates as low as possible. For these wastewater customers, we can do that by bringing service back in house, eliminating third party billing, and offering the same payment options that our other customers receive. So, if you are a new reader, welcome!

These great options are available to all SAWS customers.

Special Programs:

Senior Citizen Billing Program - Offers customers 60 years of age and older an exemption on late payment penalties for both water and sewer service charges.

Disability Billing Program - Grants disabled customers an additional ten days to pay their SAWS bill without incurring a penalty. To be eligible for this program, you must be disabled and receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) from Social Security Administration.

Affordability Discount Program - Provides qualifying customers with discounts ranging from \$3.15 to \$8.40 per month based on household size and income. Program qualifications include meeting the Federal Income Assistance Guidelines.

To apply for the for the Senior Citizen or Disability Billing Program, please call 704-SAWS (704-7297). If you would like to find out if you qualify for the Affordability Discount Program, please call the Department of Community Initiatives at 207-7830.

Payment Options:

Pay Online - You can go to saws.org to view, receive and pay your bill online. You can make a one-time payment via bank draft or credit card (VISA or MasterCard) with no commitment or obligation to continue using the service. eBill Pay directly credits your SAWS account so say goodbye to transaction fees and late charges.

(continued on pg.2)

Helotes Fire Update *(continued from pg. 1)*

According to Mayor Phil Hardberger, who is also member of the SAWS Board of Trustees, the remedy to the environmental disaster is not ideal, but there isn't much choice.

"From the very beginning of this process, SAWS and the City of San Antonio have taken a very clear stance regarding protection of the Edwards Aquifer," Hardberger said. "We have said all along that we don't want to trade an air quality problem for a water quality problem, and that is still the case.

"But, left with no other options to extinguish the fire, we have agreed to this approach at the present time, so long as the contamination does not threaten the public water supply."

Mayor Hardberger and SAWS officials are now focused on what water pollution mitigation plans and clean-up efforts will be proposed now that the fire is extinguished.

"Taking care of the fire is the first step. Cleaning up the remains and taking measures to ensure this kind of thing doesn't happen again is the next one," said SAWS CEO David Chardavoyne. "In many ways, this process has only just begun."

For additional updates on the Helotes story, visit SAWS Web site at saws.org.



Cranes attempt a non-water alternative to putting out the fire. Subsequent air quality concerns put an end to the effort.

Drinking, bathing, cleaning, cooking....



Many people take water for granted. But every day, families risk losing water service because they can't afford to pay their water bill. If you'd like to help keep water flowing to our neighbors in need, you can contribute to Project Agua, a non-profit program from SAWS helping customers pay their water bill. It's simple and no contribution is too small to help. Just look for the donation box on the return portion of your SAWS bill.

Welcome BexarMet Wastewater Customers *(continued from pg. 1)*

Automatic Bill Pay - Our Easy Pay Plan works by electronically transferring funds from your bank each month. This convenience is absolutely free!

Pay in Person - Stop by one of our service centers to pay your bill directly. Or you can visit select local businesses, like most H-E-Bs, to make paying your bill in person even more convenient. Call 704-7297 for more information.

Pay by Phone - Payment can be made via bank draft, on a credit card or debit card with a Visa or MasterCard logo through our Call Center from 7:30 am to 5:30 pm, Monday through Friday. Just call 704-7297.

Pay by Mail - Payments can be placed in the return envelope received with your bill and placed in the mail. Payment may be in the form of personal check, traveler's check, or Money Order. Please do not send cash.

Upcoming Events

13th Annual Garden Jazz Party

Mark your calendar now so you can join us at the SAWS Garden Jazz Party. This event is a special favorite for many in San Antonio, to relax and enjoy a great Sunday morning after all the frenzy of Fiesta is over. Garden Jazz features great music, a plant sale, a xeriscape scavenger hunt with prizes, and refreshments.



Gardening experts will answer all your questions on how to have a beautiful landscape using little water.

Where: San Antonio Botanical Garden
555 Funston

When: Sunday, May 6
10 a.m. — 2 p.m.

Admission: FREE during event hours

2007 Birdathon at Mitchell Lake

The Birdathon is similar to a walkathon, but with a twist: nature lovers count bird species and collect pledges from friends, family and co-workers.

All funds raised will benefit the Center's conservation, education and habitat restoration programs.

Where: Mitchell Lake Audubon Center
10750 Pleasanton Road

When: Saturday, April 14 at 7 a.m.

To participate, please call the center at 628-1639 or e-mail Susan Albert at salbert@audubon.org.