

# Words and Water: The Battle for Truth on the Guajolote Ranch

A Response from the Scenic Loop-Helotes Creek Alliance to A Formal Position Paper by SAWS dated October 10, 2025, and an Interview with Mr. Robert Puente on KSAT 12, by Myra Arthur on October 22, 2025.

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## Opening Statement

When entrusted with the protection of 2.5 million lives and the sacred aquifer beneath them, one does not get to mislead, minimize, or deflect. This document responds to recent public statements by Mr. Robert Puente, CEO of SAWS, and the formal position paper submitted to Councilwoman Marina Alderete Gavito. It is not merely a technical rebuttal—it is a moral reckoning.

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## Definitions

### What Is Sewer Effluent?

Effluent is wastewater—treated or untreated—discharged into the environment. And when that discharge enters the recharge zone of the Edwards Aquifer, it ceases to be a technicality. It becomes a test of our collective responsibility.

### Why Effluent Is Considered Pollution

Even treated effluent may contain pathogens, nutrients, and chemicals. The question is not whether it meets minimum standards. The question is whether we are willing to gamble with the health of future generations.

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## Permit Review

### What Lennar Promised vs. What the Permit Allows

Lennar's Regional President assured the public that Membrane Bio Reactor (MBR) technology would be used. The permit says otherwise. No mention of MBR. No advanced filtration. No enhanced nutrient removal. This is not a clerical oversight. It is a moral failure to align public assurances with regulatory truth.

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## **Call to Action**

This is not about opposition. It is about obligation. The obligation of public officials to speak truthfully. The obligation of corporations to be good corporate Citizens. And the obligation of citizens to demand that environmental stewardship be more than a slogan. We call on our San Antonio Mayor and council persons and our County Judge and commissioners as well as our state representatives and senators and community leaders to reject the Guajolote development and to protect the public health, and safety while ensuring the protection of the Trinity and Edwards Aquifers; preserving these not just in words, but in enforceable terms.

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## **Assumptions and Limitations of the Proposed MBR Wastewater Treatment Plant at Guajolote Ranch**

For the purposes of this analysis, we will assume—charitably—that Lennar Homes and its contracted operator, Municipal Operations, LLC, sincerely intend to construct a wastewater treatment facility utilizing Membrane Bioreactor (MBR) technology, supplemented by advanced filtration and nutrient removal capabilities. This assumption is made in light of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality’s (TCEQ) well-documented delays in updating permit application details on its website.

But sincerity is not a substitute for transparency. And good intentions, however noble, do not protect aquifers.

While MBR systems represent a meaningful advancement in wastewater treatment, they are not a panacea. Their limitations—especially in addressing contaminants of emerging concern (CECs) such as PFAS, pharmaceuticals, hormones, viruses, and heavy metals—must be understood not just technically, but ethically. Because when omissions in a permit allow persistent pollutants to enter the recharge zone of the Edwards Aquifer, the question is no longer “What can this system remove?” but “What are we willing to risk?”

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## **What MBR Systems Can and Cannot Remove**

### **Effectively Reduced by MBR (with enhancements):**

- Pharmaceuticals and personal care products
- Hormones and endocrine disruptors
- Viruses and bacteria
- Cosmetics, sunscreen, PABA
- Pesticides and household chemicals

### **Limited or Incomplete Removal:**

- PFAS and PFOS
  - Heavy metals
  - Poliovirus
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## **Enhancing MBR Performance: What's Needed but Not Promised**

- Powdered Activated Carbon (PAC)
- Advanced Oxidation Processes (AOPs)
- Reverse Osmosis (RO) or Nanofiltration (NF)
- UV or Ozone Disinfection

These enhancements are not optional—they are essential. And yet, the current permit documentation for Guajolote Ranch makes no mention of any of them.

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## **The Ethical Implication of Silence**

We have been informed that UV disinfection is planned for the Guajolote Ranch facility, should it be constructed. But the permit says nothing. No UV. No PAC. No RO. No AOPs.

This silence is not benign. It is a regulatory void into which risk flows freely.

Even with MBR technology, the absence of supplemental treatment processes means the plant may fall short in removing many CECs from its effluent stream. And when that effluent enters the recharge zone of the Edwards Aquifer, the consequences are not theoretical—they are generational.

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- **EPA Technology Brief on PPCPs and Membrane Systems** U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. (2024). *Characteristics and treatment of pharmaceuticals and personal care products (PPCPs)*. <https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2024-08/ppcp-technology-brief.pdf>  
[Characteristics and Treatment of Pharmaceuticals and Personal Care Products in Wastewater](#)

- **USGS Assessment of MBR Contaminant Removal** U.S. Geological Survey. (n.d.). *A comprehensive assessment of membrane bioreactor contaminant removal efficacy*. [A comprehensive assessment of membrane bioreactor contaminant removal efficacy through analytical chemistry, fish exposures, and microbiome characterization | U.S. Geological Survey](#)
- **Springer Study on MBR-Ozonation Optimization** Zhang, Y., Li, H., & Chen, X. (2023). Removal of emerging contaminants in a membrane bioreactor coupled with ozonation. *Water, Air, & Soil Pollution*, 234(7), Article 319. [Removal of Emerging Contaminants in a Membrane Bioreactor Coupled with Ozonation: Optimization by Response Surface Methodology \(RSM\) | Water, Air, & Soil Pollution](#)
- **MDPI Research on Integrated MBR-RO/NF Systems** Radjenović, J., Petrović, M., & Barceló, D. (2018). Removal of pharmaceutical and personal care products (PPCPs) from municipal wastewater with integrated membrane systems, MBR-RO/NF. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 15(2), 269. [Removal of Pharmaceutical and Personal Care Products \(PPCPs\) from Municipal Waste Water with Integrated Membrane Systems, MBR-RO/NF](#)
- **RSC Comparison of MBRs with/without PAC** Luo, Y., Guo, W., Ngo, H. H., & Nghiem, L. D. (2022). Comparison of pharmaceutical removal in two membrane bioreactors with/without powdered activated carbon addition. *RSC Advances*, 12(16), 1686–1694. [Comparison of pharmaceutical removal in two membrane bioreactors with/without powdered activated carbon addition - RSC Advances \(RSC Publishing\)](#)

## Special Conditions of the SAWS User Services Agreement for Guajolote Ranch

Presented below are pages 5 and 6 of the draft User Services Agreement prepared in 2022, outlining the special conditions imposed by the San Antonio Water System (SAWS) on the developer of Guajolote Ranch as a prerequisite for water service. While this version may differ from the final executed agreement, it offers a clear overview of the concessions SAWS required from the developer in exchange for providing water service to the project.

USA-26994 Guajolote Ranch (DRAFT)  
01/25/22, Page 5 of 6

The proposed development is not permitted to discharge into SAWS wastewater system.

Should the Developer choose to utilize on-site septic systems. Developer agrees to secure

appropriate utility permits from the Bexar County Public Works Department. All septic wastewater utilities shall be aerobic and shall be designed and constructed in accordance with the requirements of the Bexar County Public Works Department.

Should the Developer choose to utilize an on-site wastewater treatment facility, the Developer shall ensure that the wastewater treatment plant will, at a minimum, meet all required design and treatment standards for facilities discharging within 5 miles of the Edwards Aquifer Recharge Zone in accordance with Texas Commission on Environmental Quality Rules and Regulations. In addition, the Developer shall ensure that increased treatment requirements, to include advanced nutrient removal and effluent filtration, are implemented with a goal of protecting the Edwards Aquifer.

The Developer agrees that the Discharge Permit will not be increased in capacity or modified to a different type of permit in the future and that the wastewater treatment plant will only serve properties within the boundaries of the 1,160-acre Tract and the resulting wastewater which is generated from those properties. Developer agrees to notify SAWS in writing within 3 days of filing any application to modify the permit. Furthermore, the Developer agrees to coordinate with SAWS regarding the discharge location and that the wastewater effluent will be discharged on the Developers property at least 1-mile upstream of any other property before exiting the property.

Special Conditions of USA Preparer's Initials \_\_\_\_\_

USA-26994 Guajolote Ranch (DRAFT)  
01/25/22, Page 6 of 6

The Developer agrees that the plant will be operated and managed by a wastewater operator licensed at the A level and in good standing, and to request that TCEQ include such a requirement in any wastewater discharge permit issued authorizing the operation of the plant. The Developer also agrees that any irrigation use of the wastewater discharge shall include soil supplementation to the area being irrigated to properly absorb the effluent, which shall also be a part of the request for a discharge permit.

The Developer agrees to setting aside 50 percent of this project as open space and restricting the site to 30 percent impervious cover.

Nothing in this Agreement shall be construed as a waiver of any rights that the City of San Antonio or SAWS may have to protest or oppose an application for a discharge permit at the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality or a certificate of convenience and necessity at the Texas Public Utility Commission.

# Response to Mr. Robert Puente’s Formal Position Paper

Prepared for Councilwoman Marina Gavito | October 10, 2025

*When public trust is placed in the hands of those charged with protecting our water, our health, and our future, precision matters. So does truth. This response addresses multiple inaccuracies and omissions in the formal position paper submitted by Mr. Robert Puente, CEO of the San Antonio Water System (SAWS), regarding the proposed wastewater treatment facility at Guajolote Ranch.*

## Misrepresentation of Facility Location

Mr. Puente stated that “the wastewater treatment facility will be located on the very north central portion of the property where it will discharge to Helotes Creek.” This is demonstrably false.

According to the official Master Development Plan, the facility is—and always has been—located on the **central southern boundary** of the property. Gravity will carry influence from the subdivision downhill to the plant. Treated effluent will then be **pumped uphill** to the northeast quadrant, discharging above an existing stock tank.

This is not a minor geographic error. It reflects a troubling lack of familiarity with the project’s basic layout—especially from someone claiming deep expertise in the geology of the area. Worse, the **stock tank**, which Municipal Operations, LLC’s expert witness testified was **essential** to meeting permit limits, has mysteriously **disappeared** from the Master Development Plan. If the tank is gone, are the permit limits still achievable? Or has the public been misled?

## Ignoring Scientific Consensus

Mr. Puente and SAWS staff claim to possess a “deep understanding” of the geology and hydrogeology of the area, including the assertion that there is no transmissivity between the Edwards and Trinity Aquifers. Yet this confidence stands in stark contrast to the actions of other agencies.

The **San Antonio River Authority**, the **Edwards Aquifer Protection Program**, and the **City of San Antonio** all deemed it necessary to commission a **two-year study** by Southwest Research Institute—one of the world’s leading scientific institutions—to model the impact of sewage treatment plants on local watersheds.

SAWS not only ignored the conclusions of this study—they failed to mention it altogether.

So, the question becomes:

*Why should the people of San Antonio trust the opinion of a utility operating under a **Consent Decree** from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for its history of sewer spills, instead of the data and conclusions of world-class scientists?*

Mr. Puente would have us believe that a difference in water chemistry above and below the Haby Crossing Fault is definitive proof of non-transmissivity between the Trinity and Edwards Aquifers. That assertion is not only misleading—it's scientifically indefensible.

To claim that a localized geochemical contrast across one fault segment proves hydraulic isolation along the entire Balcones Fault Zone is like declaring a highway impassable because one exit ramp is closed—while ignoring the dozens of on-ramps, feeder roads, and overpasses that still allow traffic to flow. It's a convenient oversimplification that collapses a complex hydrogeologic reality into a politically useful fiction.

The Balcones Fault Zone is not a monolithic barrier. It is a structurally diverse, heavily faulted karst system—a mosaic of transmissive and non-transmissive features shaped by fracture density, fault architecture, stratigraphic juxtaposition, and flow path geometry. Water chemistry can vary across short distances due to differences in residence time, recharge source, mixing regimes, and microbial activity. These variations may suggest compartmentalization in isolated zones, but they do not constitute evidence of regional-scale hydraulic isolation.

Cherry-picking one geochemical snapshot to support a sweeping claim about aquifer disconnection is not science—it's spin. And in the context of public trust and water policy, it's dangerous.

## **Misleading Claims About Water Quality Protections**

Mr. Puente asserts that “SAWS does not believe there is a risk to San Antonio residents’ drinking water” due to “enhanced water quality standards” in the proposed TCEQ permit.

This is dangerously misleading.

The truth is that the TCEQ only approved a permit that meets minimum standards under the Clean Water Act.

The approved permit contains a **phosphorus limit ten times higher** than current levels in Helotes Creek. Phosphorus is a fertilizer—virtually absent in Hill Country creeks. Introducing it at such levels guarantees **eutrophication**: explosive algal growth, oxygen depletion, and the death of fish, plants, and aquatic life.

This degradation will be **trapped behind seven dams and weirs** near over 60 homes in Grey Forest, creating **odors, dead vegetation, and unsafe conditions** for humans and wildlife. It also threatens **endangered species** in federally protected caves along Helotes Creek.

## The Silent Threat of Nitrogen

While SAWS references “enhanced removal” of nitrogen in its User Services Agreement, the TCEQ permit—the only enforceable standard—contains no nitrogen limit whatsoever.

This is not a technical oversight. It is a regulatory blind spot with **serious health consequences**:

- **Nitrates** can contaminate groundwater, especially in porous limestone terrain like the Hill Country.
- They pose acute risks to **infants and pregnant women**, including **methemoglobinemia** (“blue baby syndrome”), thyroid dysfunction, and increased cancer risk.
- In surface waters, excess nitrogen fuels algal bloom, degrading water quality and harming aquatic ecosystems.

In short:

*A discharge permit with no nitrogen limit is not just inadequate—it is irresponsible.*

## Ethical Reflection

This is not a debate about engineering. It is a reckoning about ethics.

When public officials misstate basic facts, ignore scientific consensus, and defer to permits that allow dangerous levels of pollution, they do not protect the public—they expose it. The TCEQ has done NOTHING in their permit to protect the Edwards Aquifer.

We commend Councilwoman Gavito for encouraging SAWS into the open and forcing them to make their position known. In so doing, she has exposed a massive lack of accountability, a lack of true transparency, a failure to grasp the true geological facts, and surprising lack of enforceable protection and empty promises. In matters of water, where 2,5 million Texans are concerned, there is no margin for error. And no excuse for silence.

## Geological Misstatements and the Moral Cost of Misleading

In his position paper, Mr. Robert Puente offers a geological assessment of the Guajolote Ranch and Helotes Creek that is not only flawed—it is dangerously misleading.

*“Once the wastewater is discharged from the plant,” he writes, “the water would encounter two different zones of the upper Glen Rose Aquifer Formation... The Camp Bullis Unit will contain the water in the upper portions of the Trinity Aquifer.”*

This assertion ignores the most fundamental truth of the region’s geology: **Guajolote Ranch and the upper reaches of Helotes Creek sit atop the Balcones Escarpment Fault Zone**, an

area riddled with fractures, faults, and karst features. The idea that the Camp Bullis Unit acts as a reliable confining layer is geologically unsound and unsupported by hydrogeologic evidence.

While the Camp Bullis Unit may exhibit lower permeability in isolated areas, it is part of the **Upper Glen Rose Limestone**—a formation known for **heterogeneous permeability, fracturing, and karst development**. Studies by the USGS and other agencies have shown that even so-called “confining” units within this formation can allow significant vertical and lateral water movement, especially in faulted zones.

The **Cavernous Unit**, which alternates with the Camp Bullis Unit in the creek bed, is highly susceptible to karstification—enabling rapid infiltration of surface water into subsurface pathways. The presence of the **Haby Crossing Fault** further undermines Mr. Puente’s containment argument. Faults are not uniformly barriers to groundwater flow—they are often conduits enhancing flow. They can facilitate the movement of water and contaminants between geologic units. Mr. Puente’s assertion that the Haby Crossing Fault isolates the Trinity/Glen Rose from the Edwards Aquifer is misleading and ignores the current science.

In karst terrains like Helotes Creek, **surface water and pollutants bypass confining layers entirely**, entering the aquifer system through fractures, sinkholes, and fault zones. The assumption that wastewater will remain in the upper Trinity Aquifer is not just scientifically naive, it is a public health risk.

*Water does not respect bureaucratic optimism. It follows the path of least resistance—and in this terrain, that path leads directly to the Edwards Aquifer.*

- **Geologic Framework and Hydrostratigraphy of the Edwards and Trinity Aquifers Within Northern Bexar and Comal Counties, Texas** U.S. Geological Survey & Edwards Aquifer Authority. (2015). *Geologic framework and hydrostratigraphy of the Edwards and Trinity aquifers within northern Bexar and Comal Counties, Texas*. Edwards Aquifer Authority. [Geologic Framework and Hydrostratigraphy of the Edwards and Trinity Aquifers Within Northern Bexar and Comal Counties, Texas](#)
- **Finite-Element Method Development for Edwards Aquifer Modeling** Fratesi, S., et al. (2015). *Development of a finite-element groundwater flow model for the Edwards Aquifer*. Edwards Aquifer Authority. [2015\\_Fratesi-et-al\\_Finite-ElementMethodDevelopment.pdf](#)
- **Texas Water Development Board Report 353** Hutchison, W. R., et al. (2011). *Groundwater availability model for the Edwards-Trinity (Plateau) and Pecos Valley aquifers*. Texas Water Development Board, Report 353 [Groundwater Availability Model for the Edwards-Trinity \(Plateau\) and Pecos Valley Aquifers of Texas - The Portal to Texas History](#).
- **USGS Scientific Investigations Report 2012–5124** Bumgarner, J. R., Stanton, G. P., Teeple, A. P., Thomas, J. V., Houston, N. A., Payne, J. D., & Musgrove, M. L. (2012). *A conceptual model of the hydrogeologic framework, geochemistry, and groundwater-flow system of the Edwards-Trinity and related aquifers in the Pecos County region, Texas* (Scientific

Investigations Report 2012–5124). U.S. Geological Survey. [U.S. Geological Survey Scientific Investigations Report 2012–5124 \(revised July 10, 2012\)](#)

## Groundwater Monitoring and the Truth Beneath Our Feet

Just six-tenths of a mile southeast of Guajolote Ranch, the Trinity/Glen Rose Groundwater Conservation District maintains a monitoring well at La Escondida. For over 25 years, this well has quietly recorded groundwater data—largely unnoticed and uncorrelated with local rainfall patterns.

That changed with the deployment of Tempest weather stations. Scientists now have reliable rainfall estimates and have compared them with well readings. The results are striking: even modest rainfall events trigger dramatic increases in groundwater levels at La Escondida.

This is not theory—it is observation. And it reveals a simple, devastating truth:

Whatever lands on the surface of this terrain—rainwater, irrigated effluent, or direct discharge into Helotes Creek—swiftly becomes groundwater. That groundwater feeds the Edwards Aquifer, the source of drinking water for 2.5 million Texans.

A recent report from the Trinity/Glen Rose Groundwater Conservation District states:

“Water levels in the La Escondida well... indicate periods of rapid recharge in the Trinity Aquifer. Although not as ‘flashy’ as the Boerne Stage well, the dynamics are clear.

Cross-formational flow from the Trinity units into the Edwards-BFZ (Balcones Fault Zone) Aquifer is a significant source of discharge. While not directly measurable, this movement is estimated at tens to hundreds of thousands of acre-feet per year—making it a substantial component of the Trinity Aquifer’s water budget.

Dye tracing studies conducted by the Edwards Aquifer Authority confirm this interaction, showing direct connections between water in the Trinity and the Edwards via preferential flow pathways.” — *Trinity/Glen Rose Groundwater Management Plan, Adopted October 16, 2025*

This is precisely why the proposed discharge of sewer effluent—laden with Contaminants of Emerging Concern (CECs)—directly over the Trinity Aquifer Recharge Zone is not just reckless. It is scientifically indefensible. This isn’t about *belief* or *comfort*. It’s about data. It’s about hydrology. It’s about public health. Full stop.

In his remarks about “caring for our neighbors” and his so-called “lack of transmissivity” argument, Mr. Puente suggests San Antonio has nothing to worry about—that all pollution will remain in the Trinity Aquifer, which, according to him, doesn’t communicate with the Edwards.

So much for neighborly concern.

His dismissal of water safety is matched only by his misunderstanding of intraformational flow. The science is clear: the Trinity and Edwards Aquifers are connected. And pollution introduced at Guajolote Ranch will not stay put. It will move. It will spread. Water does not respect fences. And it will impact us all.

Johnson, S., et al. (2010). *Tracing Groundwater Flowpaths in the Edwards Aquifer Recharge Zone: Panther Springs Creek Groundwater Basin, Northern Bexar County, Texas*. Edwards Aquifer Authority. [2010\\_Johnson-et-al\\_PantherSpringsCreekBasinFlowpaths.pdf](#)

## **The Silent Threat of Contaminants of Emerging Concern (CECs)**

Mr. Puente’s position paper fails to mention **Contaminants of Emerging Concern (CECs)**—a glaring omission. These include pharmaceuticals, PFAS, hormones, and other hazardous chemicals that **cannot be fully removed** by package wastewater treatment plants.

Perhaps this silence is strategic. As a wastewater operator, SAWS may prefer not to spotlight the presence of these chemicals. But SAWS knows they exist. The **EPA** and **USGS** have repeatedly warned that many treatment processes cannot eliminate them. And while regulatory standards for many CECs remain undeveloped, **the science is clear**: these substances pose serious risks to human health and aquifer integrity.

To be fair, most SAWS facilities discharge treated wastewater into the San Antonio River—**downstream** from the city. The Guajolote plant, however, would release effluent **upstream**, directly into the **source of our drinking water**.

This is the crux of the issue.

## The Illusion of Safeguards

Mr. Puente writes:

*“SAWS takes the health and safety of our neighbors and customers’ water as our utmost charge.”*

Yet he pivots:

*“We have numerous processes in place to ensure that the water we provide to our customers is of the highest quality.”*

But what about the wells of nearby residents? What happened to the “concern” for neighbors? What about the wastewater—laden with contaminants that cannot be removed—that may cause **cancer, birth defects, and neurological harm**?

These are not abstract risks. They are matters of **public health** and **aquifer integrity**. And chlorination and fluoridation do **nothing** to address them.

Mr. Puente also states that “to minimize any localized Trinity Aquifer impacts,” the treatment level was negotiated to be “of a higher standard.” He adds that the facility will require highly qualified operators and continuous monitoring to detect failures. Furthermore, the discharge point was moved further north to allow time to identify issues before they reach sensitive areas.

Let’s unpack that.

*Mr. Puente is acknowledging that failures are inevitable. That good operators are no guarantee. That the land surrounding the aquifer is already recognized as sensitive. And that the only safeguard is time—time to notice a problem before it becomes irreversible.*

## The Unspoken Risk: Self-Reporting and Silence

Here is one fact every citizen should know: **these wastewater plants are poorly monitored and self-report permit exceedances and spills.**

If the Guajolote plant “accidentally” releases raw sewage, toxic substances, or even everyday **potentially lethal E. coli** into the environment—**how will nearby well owners be alerted?**

The answer is simple:

*They won’t.*

# Septic Systems, Selective Standards, and the Collapse of Logic

In his Formal Position Paper, Mr. Robert Puente offers the following assertion:

*“A potential alternative to a treatment plant would be to develop larger lots with septic systems. These individual septic systems often fail. Use of individual septic would discharge directly into soil and infiltrate the Trinity Aquifer Cavernous Unit much more readily.”*

This is a curious claim—especially considering the **User Services Agreement** between SAWS and Lennar. One of the concessions extracted by SAWS in exchange for providing water reads:

*“Should the Developer choose to utilize on-site septic systems, Developer agrees to secure appropriate utility permits from the Bexar County Public Works Department. All septic wastewater utilities shall be aerobic and shall be designed and constructed in accordance with the requirements of the Bexar County Public Works Department.”*

Bexar County has clear regulations governing aerobic septic systems, including **lot size minimums** and **mandatory maintenance agreements** to ensure ongoing monitoring. If, as Mr. Puente suggests, these systems pose a significant environmental risk, then why have they been permitted in large numbers—particularly in the **Leon Creek watershed**, where thousands of homes have been built over karst geology in recent years, all equipped with aerobic septic tanks?

SAWS has provided water to those subdivisions. Why are septic systems acceptable there—but not here? The only thing separating those developments from Guajolote Ranch is a **barbed wire fence**.

## A Comparison That Defies Reason

We struggle to understand the logic behind the claim that **1,100 homes on 550 acres equipped with aerobic septic systems**, producing approximately **380,000 gallons of effluent per day**, pose a greater environmental threat than **2,900 homes discharging over 1,000,000 gallons daily with a wastewater treatment plant**.

If, as Mr. Puente implies, the **Camp Bullis Unit is less permeable**, then it would actually seem to offer **greater geological protection**, not increased risk. Yet he argues that septic systems would “discharge directly into soil and infiltrate the Trinity Aquifer Cavernous Unit much more readily.”

This assertion collapses under scrutiny. The assertion that effluent from septic tanks would more readily penetrate the karst geology versus wastewater from a package treatment plant, whether discharged to a creek or irrigated upon the land is preposterous.

In theory, a centralized wastewater treatment plant might produce cleaner effluence. But in practice, the reality is far less reassuring. The **Texas Commission on Environmental Quality**

(TCEQ) enforces **weak permit limits**, and package plants are **notoriously incapable** of removing **Contaminants of Emerging Concern (CECs)**—pharmaceuticals, endocrine disruptors, and industrial chemicals that persist in the environment and pose serious health risks.

So, we ask:

*Where is the logic in preferring a system that discharges a million gallons of inadequately treated effluent into a sensitive watershed over a lower-volume, regulated septic approach on less permeable terrain with fewer houses and less impervious cover?*

Mr. Puente’s argument relies on **idealized assumptions** about plant performance while ignoring the **documented limitations** of current wastewater treatment technology and regulatory oversight.

## **Distance as Deflection**

To minimize public concern, Mr. Puente notes that the **nearest SAWS well is thirteen miles** from the Guajolote discharge point. But if, as Mr. Puente asserts, there is truly no risk, why mention the distance at all?

In fact, SAWS wells exist just **4.5 miles east** near Interstate 10 by The Dominion, and another **8.5 miles south** along Prue Road. These wells are closer than Mr. Puente admits—and far more vulnerable than his statement suggests.

## **A Forgotten Study, A Revealing Omission**

We raise this issue to recall a critical piece of historical data—originally intended for inclusion in the **Contested Case Hearing** over the Guajolote permit but ultimately withheld due to a **confidential settlement** between San Antonio Metro Health and Municipal Operations, LLC.

The data stemmed from the **Helotes Mulch Fire** and a study conducted by the **TCEQ** and **San Antonio Metropolitan Health District (SAMHD)** to assess the fire’s impact on the Edwards Aquifer.

Wells near the fire showed no contamination from firefighting chemicals. But investigators found **charred debris in toilet tanks upgradient** of the fire—an anomaly. Even more troubling was the discovery of **firefighting chemicals and debris in wells seven miles away** near the Valero headquarters.

Why does this matter?

*Because it reveals the unpredictable nature of water movement in karst and faulted geology.*

Oversimplified claims about what will or won’t happen in a karst environment should raise immediate concern. It is well established that in karst terrain, **water—and any pollutants it**

**carries—can reach groundwater rapidly with minimal filtration.** But the exact pathways are **impossible to predict** without **tracer dye testing**.

As the Helotes Mulch Fire study illustrates, wells within a **4.5 to 8.5 mile radius** could be affected. No such testing was performed on Guajolote Ranch.

## **Belief Is Not a Safeguard**

Statements like “we believe” or “we are comfortable” regarding the safety of our water supply are not safeguards. They are **substitutes for evidence**. And they suggest that **economic development and the sale of water** may be taking precedence over the **protection of our drinking water**.

Mr. Puente concludes his position paper by stating:

*“...the Guajolote Ranch is not without its environmental risks,” “...the City of San Antonio might consider an option to purchase the development from the property owners.”*

This statement alone underscores the gravity of the concerns surrounding Guajolote Ranch. If the risks are so significant that the City might consider buying the land to prevent development, then the public deserves more than reassurance. It deserves **truth, transparency, and protection**.

## **Response to Mr. Puente’s KSAT Interview and SAWS’ Public Position**

*“SAWS president and CEO says Guajolote Ranch development will not cause ‘lower quality water.’”* —KSAT Interview with Myra Arthur, October 23, 2025

The Scenic Loop–Helotes Creek Alliance acknowledges and appreciates Mr. Puente’s clear statement that SAWS does **not support** the Guajolote Ranch development. We commend SAWS for its efforts to reduce the proposed housing units from 6,000 to 3,000, and for advocating that 50% of the project acreage remain undeveloped, with impervious cover limited to 30%. These concessions represent meaningful improvements over the developer’s original plan, and we applaud SAWS for securing them.

We also recognize the inclusion of advanced filtration and enhanced nutrient removal in the SAWS User Services Agreement (USA). However, these provisions are **vaguely worded** and **conspicuously absent** from the permit application submitted by Municipal Operations, LLC to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ). At the May 2023 public meeting, representatives from Municipal Operations claimed to be **unaware** of these Special

Conditions—raising serious concerns about enforceability, transparency, and inter-agency coordination.

## **The Illusion of Oversight**

The requirement for a Class A operator at the Guajolote wastewater plant is meaningful in theory. But even SAWS' own Clouse/Dos Rios facility—managed by a Class A operator and considered one of the most advanced in the country—has experienced **sewage spills in four of the last five years**.

Real-world risks such as flooding, power outages, mechanical failures, and human error routinely lead to **permit exceedances** at wastewater plants across the region. A study by the Save Barton Creek Association found that **81% of Hill Country wastewater plants** had at least one permit exceedance between 2017 and 2020, with an average of **8.6 exceedances lasting 188 days**. Some plants exceeded their discharge limits **nearly every day** during the three-year study period.

This is not oversight. It is systemic failure. And placing a wastewater facility **upstream of our drinking water supply** is a gamble we cannot afford.

## **Minimization Is Not Protection**

We are deeply troubled by Mr. Puente's assertion that the Special Conditions "minimize" risk to the aquifer. Minimizing pollution is not the same as **preventing** it. Our city and county have a **fiduciary duty** to protect our water supply—not to accept its degradation in any degree.

The TCEQ permit is, by definition, a **Texas Pollution Discharge Elimination System** permit. If the Guajolote plant fails, it will potentially discharge **raw sewage directly into the Edwards Aquifer**.

## **Irrigation by Settlement, Not Science**

Equally alarming is the proposal to **irrigate one million gallons of effluent daily** onto Guajolote Ranch—part of a **confidential settlement** between SA Metro Health and Municipal Operations. This agreement, made **without the knowledge of the mayor or City Council**, effectively removed the city's official standing in the Contested Case Hearing.

It also reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of **karst geology**, which defines northern Bexar County's landscape. In karst terrain, when contaminated surface water reaches groundwater in an aquifer—it can then travel at speeds of **up to one mile per day**. Whether effluent is discharged into Helotes Creek or irrigated onto land, it will reach the aquifer.

## Ignoring Science, Embracing Speculation

SAWS' confidence in the wastewater plant's proximity to the aquifer contradicts the findings of a **two-year scientific study** conducted by Southwest Research Institute, led by aquifer expert Dr. Ronald T. Green. Funded by the Edwards Aquifer Protection Plan (EAPP), the San Antonio River Authority (SARA), and the City of San Antonio, this study should serve as the **definitive guide** on watershed risk.

Yet SAWS and TCEQ have dismissed its conclusions in favor of **speculative optimism**.

## History Matters

If Mr. Puente's remarks imply that pollution is possible but manageable through SAWS' treatment protocols, that is not reassuring. While we appreciate his efforts to calm public concern—such as during the PFAS detection in Castle Hills—we must remind the public that SAWS has operated under an **EPA Consent Decree since 2013** due to its history of sewage spills.

When asked if there's anything coming out of treated sewage water that he would consider harmful to a water supply, Mr. Puente said:

*“Not in this circumstance.”*

This is not a scientific conclusion. It is a statement of belief. And belief is not a safeguard.

## The Concessions That Weren't

The wastewater discharge permit issued by TCEQ meets only the **minimum standards** required under the Clean Water Act. It **omits advanced filtration and enhanced nutrient removal**—both of which were stipulated in the SAWS “concessions” outlined in the USA.

Unfortunately, the language of these concessions is **vague**, lacking enforceable definitions, measurable thresholds, or operational requirements. As a result, Lennar faces **no clear obligations** to fulfill the intent of the concessions.

## Soil Filtration: A Promise Without Protocol

If Lennar chooses to irrigate effluent on its property, SAWS requires **soil augmentation** at Guajolote Ranch. Yet SAWS provided **no guidance** on:

- Quantity or composition of soil required
- Monitoring of soil depth and saturation
- Criteria for replacement or remediation

Like an air conditioning filter, soil used for effluent filtration will **inevitably reach saturation**. Without clear protocols, this concession is **functionally unenforceable**.

## **Six Questions SAWS Must Answer**

Given this lack of specificity, several urgent questions arise:

1. **Will SAWS enforce its concessions with clear standards and oversight?** If not, how can SAWS claim legal standing under an agreement built on ambiguous language?
2. **Will SAWS enforce the soil amendment concession?** Who will define the standards—SAWS or independent scientists?
3. **How will SAWS monitor wastewater and stormwater discharge?** Will SAWS hire independent monitors, establish protocols, and enforce standards to protect the aquifers?
4. **Will SAWS deny water service if aquifer protections fail?** If Lennar fails to meet its obligations, will SAWS act—or simply observe?
5. **Will SAWS revoke its Certificate of Convenience and Necessity (CCN)?** If the developer fails to comply with undefined concessions, will SAWS request cancellation of its CCN?
6. **Is SAWS prepared to legally enforce these concessions, if, as Mr. Puente asserts, they are the assurances that protect San Antonio’s water?**

This is not a technical debate. It is a moral reckoning.

If SAWS cannot answer these questions with clarity and conviction, then its assurances are not protections—they are placeholders. And the aquifer, the community, and the future deserve real protection, transparency, and truth.

## **Final Reckoning: Silence, Secrecy, and the Unconscionable Risk**

Despite retaining the explicit right to protest the issuance of a TPDES permit, SAWS chose not to oppose a wastewater discharge authorization that allows **1 to 4 million gallons of effluent per day** into Helotes Creek—effluent known to contain **Contaminants of Emerging Concern (CECs)**, including compounds linked to **cancer, birth defects, and endocrine disruption**.

In his formal position address to the San Antonio City Council, Mr. Puente proclaimed: “SAWS takes the health and safety of our neighbors and customers as our utmost charge. There is no one more concerned with the health and well-being of the Edwards Aquifer than SAWS.”

Isn't the very act of extracting concessions an admission that the Guajolote project poses real risk? Mr. Puente himself conceded that the development "...is not without environmental risks." So, which is it?

If the project is risky, as Puente admits, are SAWS' vaguely worded concessions truly enough to safeguard our aquifer and our community? And if they are so thoroughly protective, as Mr. Puente now says they are, why did SAWS seek standing in the Contested Case Hearing to protest the permit **after** securing those concessions? Is it because they believed a wastewater plant discharging into the Edwards Aquifer was just too risky, especially given the TCEQ's minimal permit standards?

Or was it all political theater—a calculated performance to appear protective while quietly smoothing the way for approval?

## A Call for Transparency

We are deeply troubled by the revelation that one of SAWS' longtime outside environmental attorneys represented the **San Antonio Metropolitan Health District** in its **confidential settlement** with Municipal Operations, LLC. This dual involvement raises fundamental questions about **conflict of interest** and **institutional integrity**.

We respectfully request that Mr. Puente publicly affirm:

- That neither he nor SAWS communicated, collaborated, or advised in any way with that attorney or legal team regarding the secret settlement between Municipal Operations, LLC, and the San Antonio Metropolitan Health District .
- That SAWS played no role—direct or indirect—in the decision to **irrigate sewer effluent** onto Guajolote Ranch.
- That SAWS did not advise Metro Health or its staff on any matter related to the Guajolote development.
- That the supposed direction that the addition of four inches of topsoil added to the Guajolote Ranch was a negotiated part of the SA Metro Health settlement included by SAWS

We further underscore that **former Mayor Ron Nirenberg** nor the **San Antonio City Council**, were **consulted** in this secretive settlement, which effectively removed the City's official legal standing in the Contested Case Hearing with TCEQ.

This is not just a procedural misstep—it is a breach of public trust. But it does **not** absolve our city or county leaders of their **fiduciary duty** to protect the Edwards and Trinity Aquifers. We believe this matter should be scrutinized to determine exactly what happened, who was involved, what the parameters for settlement approval are, or should be, and whether this settlement, unapproved by the mayor or council is actually enforceable under law.

## United Opposition

We commend the bipartisan coalition of opposition:

- **Mayor Gina Ortiz Jones**
- **Former Mayor Ron Nirenberg**
- **A majority of the San Antonio City Council**
- **Bexar County Judge Peter Sakai**
- **Multiple Bexar County Commissioners**
- **All ten members of the Bexar County legislative delegation (bipartisan)**
- **Three of four area state senators**

This unified resistance reflects the gravity of the threat—and the moral clarity of those who refuse to look away.

## The Inconvenient Truth About PFAS

Mr. Puente has failed to confront a critical truth: **wastewater treatment plants cannot fully remove PFAS and other hazardous constituents** from the influent stream. These “forever chemicals” are **toxic, bioaccumulative, and linked to cancer, thyroid disease, and reproductive harm.**

The EPA and USGS have flagged PFAS as a **public health emergency**. The **\$14 billion settlement** against PFAS manufacturers and the **lawsuit filed by the Texas Attorney General** underscores the seriousness of the threat.

Yet in the absence of enforceable federal standards, agencies like TCEQ and operators like SAWS continue to treat wastewater for a **narrow set of pollutants**, while knowingly releasing dangerous compounds into our rivers, lakes, and aquifers.

This is not a regulatory gap. It is a **systemic failure**—a willful neglect of science, public health, and environmental stewardship.

## A Point to Ponder

If wastewater poses no risk, as Mr. Puente suggests, then why is the **San Antonio River—recipient of 75 years of treated sewage effluent—officially classified as “impaired”?**

Texas faces **mounting water scarcity, prolonged drought, and explosive population growth**. In this context, the integrity of our water sources is not just a priority—it is a **necessity**.

Why, then, would we accept **even the slightest risk** to the Edwards Aquifer? Why would we ignore the science? Why would we disregard the geology?

## **A Final Note of Agreement**

Despite our significant differences with Mr. Puente, we agree wholeheartedly with one statement he made before City Council:

*“...to further eliminate any potential perceived risks, the City of San Antonio might consider an option to purchase the (Guajolote) development.”*

On that point, we stand united.

Because when the stakes are this high, and the risks this grave, the only acceptable margin is **zero**. And the only acceptable outcome is **protection**. With so much of this critical watershed already conserved with taxpayer money, doesn't it make sense to conserve the last large undeveloped tract in the watershed, ensuring that at least the Helotes Creek watershed that accounts for 15% of our aquifer recharge remains as pristine as possible?

This isn't just about water. It's about trust. And it's time we scrutinize who's truly safeguarding our water future—and who's just playing the part.

**The Scenic Loop-Helotes Creek Alliance.**