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Ranger Dan Chapman watches water pour over the falls in Hamilton Pool after recent heavy rains. Because so little testing has been done, officials can't say for sure that runoff sediment is increasing.

A cloudy future for Hamilton Pool?

Area residents worry new subdivisions will foul swimming hole

By Kevin Connolly

In the fall, existing Hill Country development wars, opponents of proposed water service lines and runoff on Hamilton Pool as exemplary of the once remote natural paradise that might not so many years from now be damaged by

polluted runoff from encroaching subdivisions. That future is now, several Hill Country residents say, with work at two subdivision sites already crowding — potentially if not flooding — the Hamilton Creek watershed that feeds Hamilton Pool.

The two projects along Hamilton Pool Road are the first subdivisions on the creek. Both, several concerned neighbors contend, appear to be exploiting gaps in development rules and are grandfathered from complying with any of the stricter

environmental regulations being prepared by Travis County and the Lower Colorado River Authority.

"I can't personally make the claim that the creek is more polluted, because I haven't checked it that closely, but I just know it's been pretty damn yucky," says Rick Steinberg, who lives off Hamilton Pool Road and often drives past the creek near where it falls 50 feet into Hamilton Pool. "I think it's understandable that people out here are concerned about what will happen if the LCRA expands

its water laws and development boundaries over us here. The laws have pretty big loopholes.

The smaller subdivision is exempt from Travis County planning requirements and development standards primarily because it has the smallest lot size but one hundredth of the acre target that the acreage that would subject the subdivision to such rules, county officials say. It's a little less than half of the other proposed subdivision is being cleared for a fence without being cleared for a fence without

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RUNOFF: Hamilton Pool a battleground in fight to halt water line

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pollution-preventing erosion barriers, and regulators say that they can do nothing because the owner says the work is for agricultural purposes, not for the development.

Word of these two projects comes against the backdrop of the high-profile battle over the river authority's proposal to build a \$5 million water line, extending 7 miles west from the Village of Bee Cave, to serve three proposed and several existing subdivisions on Hamilton Pool Road. Those three developments are about 5 miles east of the Hamilton Creek watershed, but the spectre of future water service expansions encouraging dense development closer to Hamilton Pool, and throughout the Hill Country, has been a frequent refrain for opponents.

The river authority board is expected on Dec. 7 to approve the initial water line and lift a self-imposed six-month moratorium on water line expansions. The ban was triggered by public outcry and news that agency

county or state requirements, Gray said Monday.

But it is some current work that has neighbors worried about what's to come. Although the subdivision lacks any approval for any development-related land clearing within Travis County, workers have bulldozed a 20- to 30-yard-wide strip along the land's mile-long Hamilton Pool Road frontage for fence reconstruction, without installing runoff controls to keep the disturbed soil from flowing into the creek, county and river authority officials confirm.

"If fence-line clearing was done as part of an agricultural operation, like (the property owners) are saying ... there is little we can do under our non-point source pollution ordinance," said Tom Hegemier, a water quality engineer with the river authority. "There is an exemption for agricultural activities."

The results of lab tests on creek water Hegemier collected about two weeks ago, following heavy rains and inquiries from residents, showed that the creek contained 11 percent more sus-

Hamilton Pool, so county officials can't say for certain what effect the recent heavy rains have had there.

Gray, whose Gray Development Ltd. also has developed the Preserve near Dripping Springs, said that by converting the land from ranching to wildlife management, with relatively few houses, his development plan should actually reduce the amount of sediment runoff and bacteria from livestock droppings that enter the creek and pool. He said the recent clearing, which will enable replacement of a dilapidated fence with one typical for horse farms, is a legitimate continuation of the ranching activities that will continue for some time.

"We'll put up erosion controls when we do anything more than just clearing cedar, which we've been doing for seven or eight years," Gray said.

The other subdivision, 56 acres with just four lots and one house nearly complete, escaped the notice of county and river authority regulators until Sternberg, alerted by two neighbors, asked the Travis County attor-



ney had failed to publicly acknowledge it was planning a second water line to serve a Circle K development proposed along Pecos Creek that residents fear could lead to more development nearby. Gray of Austin recently filed for the Travis County for one of the 1,245-acre Ranches at Hamilton Pool, cashing in on the boom of the nearby county-operated preserve and swim club. He considered the creek

downstream from the Ranches. However, Hegemier said his subdivision was not significant enough to trigger a permit. Existing river authority ordinance prohibits future development to cause up to a 30 percent increase in water

runoff. However, county officials said the creek had not been dammed. Gray's subdivision is situated on a steep slope and there are erosion control standards and

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