

## A&M irrigation center on tap for Alamo City

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Texas A&M University System officials unveiled plans Monday to build a \$20 million Center for Irrigation Technology on 500 acres in South San Antonio. They expect the facility will help farmers and residents save water.

The project was promoted by university officials as they announced Texas and New Mexico would share a \$3.1 million federal initiative for irrigation water conservation. U.S. Rep. Henry Bonilla, R-San Antonio, sponsored the grant.

Part of that grant money will be used to develop a plan for the center, which is at least two years away and dependent on raising millions of dollars from federal, state and local governments, as well as from the private sector.

Guy Fipps, the A&M engineering professor who is heading the effort, envisions a "world-class" facility that would employ more than 40 people and attract more than 21,000 visitors each year.

Fipps said San Antonio is the ideal location.

"There's no other place in the state or in the country where the future of the region, the agricultural and urban water uses, are so intertwined and interdependent," he said.

Several possible sites on the South Side have been identified.

Fipps explained the goals of the center are to make the irrigation industry more efficient by developing performance standards, testing equipment, researching irrigation techniques and educating industry and consumers about the best practices.

Currently, no national or state standards rate the water-saving capabilities

of commercial and home irrigation equipment.

Calvin Finch, director of conservation for the San Antonio Water System, said farmers use more than half the water that is pumped from the Edwards Aquifer each year, while most of the rest is used by San Antonio businesses and residents.

By some estimates, at least half the water used to water crops and turf is wasted because of inefficient technology and practices.

"What we hope is that we'll have some technology that will allow us to maintain landscapes or even improve our landscapes," Finch said. "A lot of products are coming on the market, and we're not sure whether they work or not."

Gene Hall, a spokesman for the Texas Farm Bureau, the state's largest organization representing farmers and ranchers, said irrigators likely would welcome the center if new practices or technology were not imposed upon them.

"Farmers by and large know what works. They try to be very efficient because pumping water costs a lot of money," Hall said. "If this somehow will result in a lot of regulations, many of them will not be excited about that."

Joe Taylor, Bexar County agricultural extension agent, said area farmers primarily flood their fields or use pivot irrigation systems rather than drip irrigation systems or other more efficient equipment and practices.

"To stay in business, they're going to have to learn more efficient ways than what we've been doing in the past," Taylor said.