

The Victoria Advocate
News
Regional water plan approved
July 19, 2001
By Greg Bowen

AUSTIN -- State officials on Wednesday approved a regional water plan for Victoria and south central Texas that includes \$4.8 billion worth of water projects, including a major project near Victoria.

The projects included in the plan are designed to work along with water conservation efforts to keep water flowing to residents of the 22-county South Central Texas Regional Water Planning Group region, also called Region L, for the next 50 years.

The region extends from the coastal towns of Seadrift and Port Lavaca inland to Victoria, San Antonio, San Marcos and Uvalde. The area includes DeWitt, Calhoun, Goliad, Gonzales, Karnes and Refugio counties, among others.

San Antonio and Bexar County would get about 75 percent of the new water supplies proposed under the regional plan.

The Region L plan was the last of 16 regional water plans from across the state to be approved by the Texas Water Development Board.

The board, which approved the other plans last month, will use the 16 plans to fashion its statewide water plan, which it must send to the Texas Legislature next January.

Evelyn Bonavita of San Antonio, chairman of the 21-member South Central Texas Regional Water Planning Group, said Wednesday she was delighted that the Water Development Board approved the Region L plan, which had been three-plus years in the making.

"We are relieved this day has finally come," Bonavita said. Approval came at a meeting in the Travis Building in the shadow of the State Capitol.

Bonavita said she was proud that the regional water planners had been able to work through their differences to fashion the plan.

"A region that has really been subject to controversy and bad feeling came together to make a plan that will provide enough water for the people in the region," she said.

Controversy centered on such issues as construction of large reservoirs (none are in the final plan), water rights, the mandated need to cut usage of the Edwards Aquifer, rural vs. metropolitan conflicts and environmental issues.

Craig Pedersen, executive administrator of the Water Development Board, congratulated the planning group for "dealing with some of the most difficult water issues not only in this state but in this country."

The board's approval came despite appeals by environmentalists.

Tom Stehn, the whooping crane coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said the projects outlined in the plan could reduce freshwater inflows into whooping crane habitat at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. To do so would pose a "definite threat to the survival" of the endangered whoopers, Stehn said.

Norman Johns of the National Wildlife Federation said the regional plan not only could have "grave possibilities" for bays and estuaries, but could damage aquifers with its proposed water well fields in Gonzales County and elsewhere.

Dianne Wassenich of the San Marcos River Foundation also questioned whether the water projects in the plan might affect wildlife in the bays and estuaries.

"There are going to have to be trade-offs," said Water Development Board member Jack Hunt.

Planning group member Bill West, general manager of the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority, had reason to be pleased with the board's decision.

"We got it. We got it," West exclaimed after the meeting.

GBRA is a co-sponsor in the Lower Guadalupe River Diversions project, which had stalled approval of the Region L plan.

The project, estimated to cost in the \$500 million range, for river water drawn from the Guadalupe near Tivoli and well water pumped up from the ground in Victoria and Refugio counties to be shipped to San Antonio via a 133-mile long pipeline.

The water would be stored in two 25,000 acre-foot holding ponds in Refugio County before being piped to Bexar County.

The project, which is the biggest water project planned for the Victoria area, ran into a roadblock in May when the Water Development Board told Region L it would have to revise downward its projections of the amount of water that the project could deliver.

Water Development Board staffers asked for the revision because they said the regional water planners had failed to classify the transfer of water from the Tivoli area to San Antonio as an "interbasin transfer" from the Guadalupe River Basin to the San Antonio River Basin.

State prohibitions against interbasin transfers are designed to ensure that the water needs in one basin aren't disregarded in favor of the needs of another.

So water planners drew up a second version of the project, this one classifying it as an interbasin transfer, for inclusion in the regional plan along with the original description.

The amount of river water that would be available to the project as an interbasin transfer is much less.

The two versions were accepted by the Water Development Board along with the rest of the Region L plan.

The version of the Lower Guadalupe Diversions project that will ultimately be built will be decided later by the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission when state permits are sought for the project.

West said GBRA and its partners in the project, the San Antonio River Authority and the San Antonio Water System, will seek permits for the project as soon as possible.

They hope to begin construction in seven years.

An important aspect of having a project included in the plan is that after January 2002, the state will provide financial assistance only to water supply projects listed in the plan.

The projects mentioned in the plan will be built only if there are financial sponsors for them. But the state plans to help pay for the projects.

The \$4.8 billion in proposed projects range from recharge dams on the Edwards Aquifer to a seawater desalination plant on the Gulf Coast to capturing unclaimed water from the Colorado River near Bay City.

The plan also proposes water conservation measures for Victoria and other selected cities across the region. Those measures include ordinances requiring older, less effective plumbing equipment in homes and businesses to be replaced with new, modern equipment that uses less water.

Copies of the plan, which fills three thick loose-leaf binders and is more than 2,400 pages long, can be seen at Victoria County Clerk Val Huvar's office in the county courthouse and at the Victoria Public Library.

The water planning effort began in 1997 with the passage of Senate Bill 1, which was drafted in response to water shortages during the extensive drought of 1995-'96.

Wednesday's approval of the Region L plan was contingent upon the Water Development Board's staff approving information included in the numerous data sheets that accompany

the plan. The sheets include information on such things as water use and population growth projections.

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