

WATER SUPPLY OPTION EMERGES

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Urban North Texas has been looking 130 miles to the east for its future water supply -- a potential new reservoir that would be one of Texas' biggest, plopped onto the barely peopled woodlands of the Sulphur River.

A federal study completed in February but known only to a few insiders suggests that the region might want to look even farther east -- almost as far as the Arkansas border.

The new idea comes with a big difference: no new reservoir.

The Army Corps of Engineers says the growing urban area could satisfy most of its future thirst without flooding 60,000 acres of rural Sulphur River bottom with the Marvin Nichols reservoir. The prospect of the new lake, still only in the discussion stage, has environmentalists, wildlife agency officials, loggers and fourth-generations northeast Texas ranchers up in arms.

The corps' alternative is to redesignate some of the storage in an existing corps reservoir -- Wright Patman, southwest of Texarkana -- as water supply and pipe the unclaimed extra westward to another corps lake, Jim Chapman. Chapman, also known as Cooper Lake, is hooked up to the urban region's existing water system.

The corps thinks that option could provide about 300,000 acre-feet of water a year, said Kevin Craig, a project manager with the corps' Fort Worth office. An acre-foot is an engineer's unit for measuring large volumes of water, about 326,000 gallons. A rough estimate puts the cost of that option at \$400 million.

Marvin Nichols would supply urban North Texas with an estimated 441,000 to 495,000 acre-feet a year, at a cost to the region of about \$1.7 billion.

None of those figures is firm. However, that initial comparison would make each acre-foot of Wright Patman water cheaper to develop, perhaps by two-thirds, than Marvin Nichols water. Either option would require pump stations and energy to run them, but creating Marvin Nichols also would involve buying land for the lake and for habitat conservation areas, plus money for lake construction.

Marvin Nichols also would face tougher environmental permitting requirements and potential court fights that could delay completion by years, planners say. No water from the lake would reach North Texas before 2030.

Since Wright Patman would provide less water, the region would still have to find as much as 195,000 acre-feet a year from other sources, though new population and water-demand forecasts could change that amount. Nichols opponents say more aggressive local conservation and tapping other existing sources with extra water, such as Lake Texoma, could fill the gap.

"It's feasible," said John Jones, manager of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's White Oak Creek Wildlife Management Area, adjacent to the potential Marvin Nichols site. "You would have to build a pipe, but there'd be no habitat loss."

Mr. Craig said the corps study, part of a congressionally required look at water in corps lakes in Texas, presents an option, not a recommendation. "It was a preliminary look at how much water could be obtained from that area," he said. "This was information to assist the region in their future water management strategy."

Current users of Wright Patman water wouldn't lose any water under the options the corps studied. Wright Patman is Texarkana's water supply.

The corps study isn't the only indication that planners for urban North Texas are looking at alternatives to Marvin Nichols, the anchor of the region's state-mandated 2001 water plan. Dallas officials are also planning to send scouts as far away as Toledo Bend Reservoir -- on the southeast Texas-Louisiana line -- seeking possible supplies.

Neither Wright Patman nor Toledo Bend appears in the 2001 North Texas regional plan. But Jim Parks, chairman of the region's water planning group, said planners would consider Wright Patman or anything else to meet the need for water. "It, as well as other things, sounds like potentials for future water supplies," said Mr. Parks, executive director of the North Texas Municipal Water District, which provides water to cities north and northeast of Dallas.

Despite opposition to it in northeast Texas, Marvin Nichols also has to be considered, Mr. Parks added. The region has made no commitment to the project and is about 18 months from completing its latest revised plan, he said. But the controversial lake -- which has lost the backing of the northeast Texas regional water planning group -- will remain on the table, Mr. Parks said.

"Marvin Nichols is one of the possible components of that program and will continue to be until we see something that makes more sense," he said.

Some other potential options for the region already have evaporated. Talks with Oklahoma about piping water from that state's wet southeastern area are all but dead.

Environmentalists who oppose Marvin Nichols aren't ready to embrace the Wright Patman idea as the solution to North Texas' water needs, said Norman Johns, a hydrologist, or water expert, with the National Wildlife Federation. They want the urban area to clamp down first on waste, both by fixing leaky systems such as Dallas' and by pressing much harder for drought-tolerant landscaping and other water-saving efforts in the growing suburbs.

"The Number 1 priority ought to be conservation, then using existing reservoirs," Mr. Johns said. "I don't want to rejoice at this [Wright Patman] safety valve when the potential is so huge for conservation."

Mary Vogelsson of Dallas, a public representative on the North Texas water-planning group, said she wants conservation. Wright Patman, Lake Texoma and other environmentally friendly water sources to get a more serious look than they've gotten so far.

"We have a lot of resources that we haven't tapped into yet," Ms. Vogelsson said. "We have to keep pushing and looking at more alternatives, and at last I think we are getting there."