

Planners to seek state funds for water study

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SAN ANTONIO - Regional water planners are preparing to seek state funds for a study on the effects of imports and exports of underground water by the emerging class of entrepreneurs known as water marketers.

Planner Con Mims of Uvalde pitched the idea for the study at Thursday's meeting of the South Central Texas Regional Water Planning Group, also known as Region L, which includes the local area.

Mims said the study is needed in light of pressure now being exerted upon San Antonio officials by water marketers eager to sell underground water from Kinney and Uvalde counties to the Alamo City.

Such sales aren't included in the 2001 regional water plan, which details the water projects, conservation efforts and other strategies planners have approved to meet the water needs of the 21-county region for the next 50 years.

"For regional water planners, such movements of groundwater may have substantial impact on supply and demand calculations as well as on permitted surface water rights; shallow agricultural, municipal and domestic wells; springflows; surface supplies; environmental flows; aquifer levels; and the economic and social well-being of citizens within the planning region," Mims said.

He suggested the proposed study use the Kinney and Uvalde county water marketers' plan "as a study case that would be useful to Region L and other planning regions in the state where groundwater exports are contemplated."

Mims suggested to his fellow water planners, who are now in the process of updating the regional water plan for 2006, that they seek supplemental funding available from the Texas Water Development Board to finance the study.

Other planners backed the idea and the group instructed its executive committee to meet next week to draft a proposal for the supplemental funding.

The planners emphasized that studying the water marketers' plans for moving groundwater from Kinney and Uvalde would not be an endorsement of that proposal.

"We don't want to endorse it," said water planner John Kight of Boerne. "What we want to do is find out what would happen to us here if that (groundwater sale) happened."

Planning group members Gary Middleton, mayor of Victoria, and Bill Jones, a representative of Victoria's O'Connor Ranches, suggested the water marketing study also examine a proposal to export underground water from Refugio County.

The San Patricio Municipal Water District, which supplies water to Rockport, Aransas Pass, Ingleside, Gregory, Portland, Taft and other areas, is looking at the possibility of contracting with a Refugio County water-marketing group to provide groundwater to the MUD.

Jones said including the Refugio County situation in the Region L study could help a five-county alliance of water districts from Goliad, Refugio, DeWitt, Bee, Karnes and Live Oak counties, which is struggling to finance a study on the impacts of large-scale groundwater pumping in the area.

"The agricultural interests down there are greatly concerned about this," Jones said. "If there is any supplemental funding available, I think that would be a great place to direct it."

The water planners also:

- Decided to send a written protest to the Texas Water Development Board concerning its upcoming study on the future impact of proposed water projects on water-flow levels in the state's rivers.

The water development board is proposing not to include in its projections of future river-flow levels the amounts of treated wastewater now being released from sewer plants into rivers.

The water development board's hydrologist Yujuin Yang said producers of the wastewater aren't compelled in most cases to place it into rivers. Because the treated water is becoming more and more coveted, its producers will likely not dump it into rivers in the future, he said.

Region L planner Greg Rothe of San Antonio said the San Antonio River now receives more than 130,000 acre-feet of such treated effluent each year.

That treated wastewater is figured into Region L's water supply availability projections. Rothe said if it isn't counted as part of the water supply, planners will be driven to find other sources of water to replace it.

"That's going to drive us to use more groundwater - and that's not a good thing," said Rothe.

- Planners invited residents of the region to take the water policy and issues survey on the group's Web site, www.watershedexperience.com

Counties included in the region are Victoria, Calhoun, DeWitt, Goliad, Gonzales, Refugio, Karnes, Atascosa, Bexar, Caldwell, Comal, Dimmit, Frio, Guadalupe, Hays, Kendall, La Salle, Medina, Uvalde, Wilson and Zavala.

Results of the survey will help the water planners identify issues they may want to discuss in future planning sessions.

On the Web site, the survey is found under the "document library" tab.

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