

6/26/04 BRA touts plan to increase water supply

By J.B. SMITH Tribune-Herald staff writer

The Brazos River Authority says it has a plan to increase its water supply by more than 50 percent, guard against droughts and postpone the need to build reservoirs by decades — all at minimal cost and without damage to the environment.

The Waco-based authority applied Friday for state permits for an additional 421,000 acre-feet of water a year, for a total of 1.2 million acre-feet a year, that it would get by managing reservoirs more efficiently and locking up the rights to treated sewer plant discharges.

Under the new plan, the BRA would also donate 100,000 acre-feet per year of that water to the Texas Water Trust to ensure water flow in the river for wildlife.

"This plan would enable the authority to develop a major additional water supply in the shortest time possible (within a few years) with minimal expense," said Phil Ford, the BRA's chief executive.

The BRA is the state-chartered steward of surface water in a river basin stretching from the Panhandle to the Gulf Coast, and including such cities as Waco, Lubbock, Abilene, Round Rock and Sugar Land.

But one element of the plan could put the BRA on a collision course with Waco. The city earlier this year applied to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality for a permit to sell its treated effluent downstream. The BRA claims the "return flow" belongs to the state once it hits the river, so it should be under the BRA's control to sell or store.

"Their application for permit would be in conflict with ours," said Wiley Stem, Waco assistant city manager, who has not seen the BRA plan. "We have the complete and total right to reuse our water — that's our position."

The city of Austin and the Lower Colorado River Authority have been in a legal battle over the same issue, with Austin claiming the right to use its return flows at city electrical generating plants. Stem said he hopes the city and the BRA can come to an agreement during the permit process.

"Certainly we would try to do that," he said. "Ideally, we're both interested in putting the water to beneficial use. If that's all they're interested in, revenue shouldn't be an issue for them."

Meanwhile, the BRA is asking the state for more flexibility in shifting water around through the basin, using the 12 reservoirs that the authority directly controls. Those reservoirs include Possum Kingdom Lake, Lake Belton, Lake Granger, Lake Georgetown, Lake Whitney, Lake Limestone, Lake Granbury and others. Lake Waco is not among the lakes that would be affected, Ford said.

BRA officials say new computer models created as part of the state water plan have shown them that they can meet the basin's growing water demands through better use of existing supply.

For example, Possum Kingdom, in arid West Texas, releases a certain amount of water downstream each year, even during droughts. The reason is the BRA decades ago contracted to sell water from Possum Kingdom to rice farmers and industries along the Gulf Coast, hundreds of miles downstream.

Under the new plan, the BRA could meet those downstream obligations with water from a more plentiful reservoir, such as Lake Limestone on the Navasota River. That would free up more

water for West Texas towns, such as Abilene, which has a connection to Possum Kingdom Lake.

BRA officials said no one's water rights will be compromised.

"Nothing in this proposal affects any current permit-holders," Ford said.

He said the BRA is only targeting the water storage capacity in reservoirs that has not yet been appropriated to end users. Many lakes, such as Granger and Limestone, have large undesignated reserves of water.

BRA officials acknowledged that the plan would sometimes require them to draw down certain reservoirs to lower levels, but the reservoirs were designed for that. Ford said the BRA also wants to explore raising the authorized levels of certain lakes, including Georgetown, Granger and Belton, much as the city of Waco did recently with Lake Waco. Raising the lake levels would allow the BRA to store and share more water.

Ford said the management plan might cost about \$7.5 million, including the cost of the permit process and public hearings the BRA plans to hold. By contrast, the BRA's next planned reservoir, Allen's Creek near Houston, will cost about \$200 million and won't open until 2018.

"This plan says we can (manage water) more efficiently," Ford said. "Our goal is to come up with smart ways to make that happen."

Joe Hinton, chairman of the BRA board, said the authority is on the cutting edge of water management, and he believes the plan will have wide support once people understand it.

"I think we're on the side of the angels," he said.

J.B. Smith can be reached at jbsmith@wacotrib.com or at 757-5752.