

State officials now looking for public input on its new plan

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AUSTIN - Texas will fall short of the projected annual demand for water in year 2050 if drought conditions exist, according to the State Water Plan.

The plan, developed in 2002, is designed to prepare the state to meet water demands during drought conditions. It's based on 16 regional water plans that recommended various water-management strategies to meet future needs, including conservation.

Nearly 900 Texas cities will have to either reduce their demand for water or develop new sources of it by 2050, officials say.

For most of us, it's disturbing that Texas could someday find itself unable to provide enough water to meet demand. State and local officials and lawmakers are trying to avoid such a situation. They are examining ways to ensure that Texas has enough water, and one of the most important efforts involves conservation.

Conservation efforts are crucial to the overall strategy to ensure that Texas has enough water. In 2003, a bill by state Sen. Robert Duncan, R-Lubbock, created an important group - the Water Conservation Implementation Task Force. The 32-member group is studying conservation measures in Texas and looking at ways to boost those efforts.

Members include community officials who deal with water issues and other interested parties ranging from environmentalists to engineers. The task force was designed to bring focus to state policy on water conservation, which many lawmakers say was fragmented.

For the past year, members have been reviewing, evaluating and preparing recommendations about the optimum levels of water-use efficiency and conservation for the state. Now, the task force is asking for public input on its draft report. Members also developed a best management practices guide for regional water planning groups and others responsible for water delivery service. The task force is taking public comments on both documents through Aug. 23. They are available on the Texas Water Development Board's Web site at www.twdb.state.tx.us

Public input on water conservation and other issues is important. Recommendations by the task force and other legislative committees are submitted to the Legislature and often become law. Now is when citizens can influence the process.

Task force members will prepare a final report and deliver it to Gov. Rick Perry and the Legislature by Nov. 1. The draft report points out the damaging effect of predictions that the state could fall 7.5 million acre/feet short of supplying enough water in 2050 if drought conditions exist.

"Droughts are a recurring theme in Texas and a projected shortfall of these dimensions would have devastating effects on the Texas economy," according to the task force's report. "Addressing this projected shortfall presents an extraordinary challenge for citizens of Texas."

The report includes recommendations too numerous to list here but a key suggestion is the creation of a statewide public awareness program for water conservation. Task force members envision the campaign being similar to the successful Don't Mess with Texas anti-litter campaign.

But, of course, there's a hefty price tag for such an effort. The campaign would cost an estimated \$10 million in the first year, \$6.7 million in the second year and \$5.7 million per year in subsequent years.

"The task force believes that a statewide program will greatly complement and reinforce other local and regional programs and activities," according to the draft report. "The task force views a statewide public awareness program as the foundation of the integrated actions and recommendations...and essential to realizing the greatest potential of many of the other recommendations."

An awareness campaign is important but the steep cost may be a tough sell to a Legislature that is more focused on cutting state agency budgets than creating new programs. Even so, most people would agree that ensuring an adequate water supply for future must be a top priority.

Another recommendation calls for creating a Water Conservation Advisory Council to advise the Legislature and other interested parties on water-conservation issues. Task force members also are encouraging lawmakers to establish performance standards for toilets and to create a Water Management Resource Library for Texas.

Now it's time for the public to give input and for lawmakers to make the commitment to water conservation. The state's future may depend on it.

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