

Water planning group looks at projected use

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Nailing down the regional water supply-and-demand numbers is a difficult task for the Panhandle Water Planning Group, but a crucial one in meeting the demands of Senate Bill 1 to create a state water plan.

The water planning group, in a meeting Thursday, looked at some preliminary numbers put together by Stefan Schuster, project manager for Freese and Nichols Inc. of Austin.

The group is working on the 2006 Regional Water Plan, which will be incorporated into the 2007 State Water Plan.

Based on the goal of having 50 percent of the water left after 50 years, the water group's goal to keep use at 1.25 percent of the saturated thickness of the Ogallala Aquifer puts some counties on alert that changes must come in the near future.

The needs showing up are policy needs at this time and not true water needs, Schuster said, adding they don't include any conservation methods by anyone. But, he said, they are an indication there will be a need for cut backs in use or for areas to find new supply.

"We have to look at it as if we stick our head in the sand and there is nothing done, this is where we are headed," said C.E. Williams, water planning group chairman and general manager of Panhandle Groundwater Conservation District.

Bill Hallerberg of Amarillo, representing industry on the board, said it shows "the water usage is already greater in some counties than what we feel should be used based on the 1.25-percent goal."

Williams said once the numbers are determined, an effort he hopes the group can complete by February, the next step will be to work on strategies to help achieve the goal.

The water group can only make recommendations on strategies, but cannot enforce them or the goal of a 1.25-percent decline limit per year.

Dr. Steve Amosson, Texas Cooperative Extension Service economist, presented to the board projected water savings figures, as well as regional gross receipts impacts, for several strategies, including: use of the North Plains Potential Evapotranspiration Network for irrigation scheduling; changes in crop varieties; irrigation equipment changes; changes in crop types, conservation tillage methods, precipitation enhancement and going from irrigation to dryland farming.

Amosson said conservation tillage and changing crop varieties won't do much to save water, but changing from irrigation to dryland or changing crop types will, as will precipitation enhancement and irrigation equipment changes.

He said the change in irrigation equipment will be the most expensive strategy, but when direct regional impact from changes in gross sales are considered, the most costly are changing crop types and changing from irrigation to dryland farming.

Water management strategies must be subjected to a multi-dimensional evaluation, Amosson said.

He also said without teeth in future water conservation strategies, they will have little impact on water conservation.

"Also, we need to look at what rising natural gas prices have done to irrigation," he said, adding irrigation accounts for 89 percent of the region's water use.

"It (gas prices) may be the cure to a lot of water planning issues."