

Water planners try to determine regional needs

By CHRISTINE S. DIAMOND The Lufkin Daily News

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Behavioral patterns of today's water users helped East Texas water planners determine that Angelina and Nacogdoches counties will require the region's greatest increase in water supplies a half-century from now.

To meet those water needs, as well as those outside the 20-county area region, the East Texas Regional Water Board is considering 14 sites where a reservoir, or reservoirs, could be constructed in this part of the state. Right now, the proposed Lake Columbia is front and center on the drawing board.

Overall, the Region I Water Planning Group has projected the region's population to increase from 1.01 million to 1.47 million by 2060 — and with it an increased water demand from the current 704,320 acre feet per year to 1.26 million acre feet in 2060. More than half of the future water demand will come from manufacturing and municipal sectors, the water group's report predicts.

Decisions to dam rivers and create new lakes as future water sources are spurred by these long-term water plans that the regional water groups create and recreate every five years.

"Basically, what (the water planners) are saying is: Based on population projections, here is the amount of water estimated will be used. They are estimations," said Myron Hess, a legal advisor with the National Wildlife Federation in Texas. "If water conservation happens, that is considered a way to meet the demands."

In other words, when regional water planners calculate how much water will be pouring from the taps in 50 years, they aren't counting on businesses, municipalities or residents to begin implementing practices such as rainwater harvesting if they aren't currently doing so — as many Central Texas cities have begun doing. Installing more efficient appliances, such as toilets and washing machines, also could help reduce the projected demand to some extent.

Manufacturing and municipalities are attributed with causing 58 percent of the increase in future water needs, according to a press release from the Region I water group.

"The greatest percentage increases in municipal demands for water will be in Polk, Nacogdoches, Angelina and Smith counties," the press release states. "Manufacturing water needs will be the greatest in Orange, Jasper, Jefferson, Angelina and Smith counties."

At a previous meeting, consultant Gary Graham with Schaumburg & Polk Inc. said East Texas would continue to pump its water from groundwater. But in his report to the planning group, he said several counties are approaching their maximum limit on what is available from groundwater — including Angelina, Cherokee, Hardin, Nacogdoches, Orange, Shelby and Smith.

That's why Graham advised the East Texas Regional Water Planning Board last week to consider and include in their 2006 long-range water plan the possibility of 14 hypothetical reservoir sites.

Although Lake Columbia, projected to be built on Mud Creek east of Jacksonville, was the only reservoir the board approved as a "unique reservoir site designation," the board kept the remaining reservoirs in their plan as "alternative" water supply strategies.

The alternate water strategies include "Big Cow Creek and near Bon Wier on the Sabine River, both in Newton County, near Carthage on the Sabine River, on Upper Wilds Creek near Kilgore, on Rabbit Creek in Rusk and Smith counties, on Tiawichi and Mill Creeks in Rusk County, on the Sabine River near Logansport, La., on Socagee Creek in Panola County, and on Mud Creek near Ponta in Cherokee County" and Lake Naconiche in Nacogdoches County, according to Region I's press release. Construction already has begun on Naconiche.

Making concrete efforts at water conservation is a prerequisite to qualify for a water permit from the Texas Commission on Natural Resources in order to build a reservoir, Hess said. The level of conservation measures put forth by a city claiming to need a new water source increases when an entity tries to make a case for acquiring a water source outside their region — as in the case of the Dallas City Council seeking water in East Texas from the proposed Fastrill Reservoir, he said. That would also apply to existing reservoirs such as Sam Rayburn and Toledo Bend, he said.

Hess said the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality would determine the highest conservation level, but that it has not yet done so.

"In theory (TCEQ's) decision can be appealed in court," he said. "Landowners can participate in the hearing process and later go to court to appeal the process. You have to let the agency make its decision and then you do have the right to go to court."

Copies of the East Texas Regional Water Board plan are available for public review at each of the Region I county courthouses, one library per county and online at: www.detcog.org/etrwpg. Three meetings scheduled for 6 p.m. on July 12 in Tyler, July 13 in Nacogdoches, and July 14 in Beaumont will be held at which the public may address any concerns they have over the planning group's proposed 2006 water plan.

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