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COMMENTARY

Hess: Central Texas' water plan must protect a coastal gem

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The Lower Colorado Regional Water Planning Group has just finished a draft plan that will guide where this region gets its water over the next 50 years. In a dry state such as Texas, it makes sense to have a comprehensive plan for managing rivers, lakes and aquifers, and the planning group deserves our thanks for its effort.

Many elements of the regional plan make sense. For example, it calls for increased municipal water conservation. Using our water more efficiently is logical, because most of the new demands will come from population growth in the Austin area.

The plan also sensibly endorses sustainable groundwater pumping to balance use with recharge, which should keep our springs flowing and our wells productive for future generations.

Additionally, the plan is notable for recognizing the importance of planning for water to protect the health and productivity of the Colorado River and Matagorda Bay.

Unfortunately, one element of the draft plan could call into question the future of the river and the bay. The proposed LCRA/SAWS Water Project would take about 50 billion gallons a year from near the mouth of the Colorado River and pump it to the San Antonio area at a cost of roughly \$1 billion.

Fifty billion gallons is no small amount of water; it is about the same amount the City of Austin uses every year. The water for San Antonio will come from what the LCRA calls "excess and unused river flows" and from water made available through increased efficiency measures and groundwater pumping for rice farmers.

This "excess and unused" water might actually be critical to Matagorda Bay, one of the most productive areas on the Texas coast. Protected by barrier islands and fueled by the mixture of fresh water from the river with salty water from the Gulf, the bay is a nursery ground for shrimp, oysters, redfish, black drum, flounder and many other aquatic species.

Matagorda Bay generates millions of dollars a year in economic activity through commercial and recreational fishing and nature tourism such as birdwatching. In fact, the area is such a haven for birds that it has won the Audubon Society's prestigious international Christmas Day bird count eight years running.

All of this natural and economic bounty would be at risk if the amount of freshwater making it from the river into the bay falls too low. This is especially important during times of drought. One LCRA analysis shows that during a drought with the project in-place, river flows could be below levels critical for key species two-thirds of the time.

The LCRA and San Antonio are now funding scientific studies looking into how the project might affect the bay and the fish and wildlife it supports. These studies are complex, and they aren't scheduled to be completed until about 2010. While the LCRA's current leader has committed to protect the river and the bay, we don't know who will be in charge five years from now.

The planning group should make its current acceptance of this project contingent on a determination, once the studies are complete, that the project won't harm the Colorado River or Matagorda Bay.

After all, planning to take care of our natural resources, for today and for our children's tomorrows, just makes common sense.

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