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Public gives Region L opinions on water plan

GREG BOWEN

Victoria Advocate

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SAN ANTONIO - Requests to remove the Lower Guadalupe Water Supply Project from the regional water plan account for the second-largest category of comment received by water planners now gathering public input on their proposed updated plan to supply water to the 21-county region stretching from east of Victoria to west of San Antonio.

Twenty-seven comments against the Lower Guadalupe project - a proposal to export river water and underground water by the billions of gallons per year from the Victoria area to San Antonio - had been received by water planners as of Wednesday.

The public comment period opened in mid-July when the planners for the South Central Texas Regional Water Planning Group, also known as Region L, unveiled their proposed updated water plan at public hearings in Victoria, Uvalde and San Antonio.

The leading category of comment received thus far supports striking from the regional plan groundwater exports from Wilson County to San Antonio. Thirty-three such comments had been received, according to a score sheet distributed Thursday to Region L board members by planning group consultant Maggie Dalthorp.

Dalthorp said 200 written and oral comments had been received as of Wednesday.

The public comment period continues through Sept. 20, she said.

The comment score sheet also showed that:

- Twenty-one had asked planners to consider desalination more seriously as a water-supply option. But two commented they believe the cost and exposure to hurricanes of desalination facilities make desal water impractical.
- A dozen said economic risks associated with groundwater pumping had not been sufficiently considered in the proposed plan.
- Eleven asked that underground water supplies in rural areas not be diminished in order to supply urban growth.
- Nine said they support the plan's water conservation efforts.
- Six were against pumping groundwater from Victoria and Goliad counties and other areas of the Gulf Coast Aquifer. Three asked that the groundwater exports planned from Gonzales County be removed from the plan.
- A half-dozen opined that water should not be moved from one area to the benefit of another area.
- Two supported rainwater harvesting and one supported using atmospheric water as a water supply.

The proposed Region L plan could be revised based on the public comments received.

Region L chairwoman Evelyn Bonavita of San Antonio said she expects the planning group to start next month and finish in December the task of deciding which projects will remain in the plan and which will be taken out.

To help the planners reach consensus, a facilitator from California State University in Sacramento's Center for Collaborative Policy, John Folk-Williams, will be brought in to work with the planning group.

Folk-Williams helped the planning group reach consensus when it worked to develop its 2001 regional plan, she said.

The new plan - a \$1.2 million update of the 2001 regional water plan - must be turned in to the Texas Water Development Board by Jan 5. TWDB will review it for inclusion in the official 2007 state water plan.

Water projects must be included in the regional and state plans in order to be eligible for state permits and funding.

The Region L plan covers the counties of Victoria, DeWitt, Goliad, Gonzales, Refugio, Calhoun, Karnes, Bexar, Guadalupe, Wilson, Comal, Caldwell, Atascosa, Dimmit, Frio, Kendall, La Salle, Medina, Uvalde and Zavala, as well as part of Hays County.

Copies of the proposed south-central Texas plan are available on the planners' Web site: www.watershedexperience.com as are instructions on how to submit written comments on the plan before the Sept. 20 deadline.