

Victoria opposes new water project

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A proposed new water project that would supply the San Antonio area with water taken from the Guadalupe River upstream of Seguin and with underground water from Gonzales County is drawing opposition in Victoria and elsewhere.

Regional water planners will hold a public hearing Oct. 13 in New Braunfels to take comment on whether to add the project to the Region L water plan, which catalogs the projects and strategies that will provide water for the next half-century to the 21-county region stretching from east of Victoria to west of San Antonio.

Victoria's Gary Middleton, the city's former mayor and its representative on the Region L planning group's board of directors, said he is against adding the Lake Dunlap/Wells Ranch project to the regional water plan.

"It will impact other water rights downstream (on the Guadalupe) and those who represent those interests strongly recommend not to approve it," Middleton said.

Jerry James, the director of environmental services for the city of Victoria, said Victoria officials are watching very closely the progress of the Lake Dunlap/Wells Ranch project at the regional water planning level.

The city is concerned that the project's use of Guadalupe River water could possibly have a detrimental effect on the ability of the city of Victoria, especially during droughts, to be able to get all of the river water available to it through its state water-rights permit, James said.

He said the city stands ready to express that concern to state officials should the Dunlap project make it into the regional water plan.

The \$45 million project would be sponsored by the Canyon Regional Water Authority, which supplies water to the Bexar Metropolitan Water District and others in and around San Antonio.

A description of the project provided by Region L says it would extract 5,600 acre-feet per year of Guadalupe River water at Lake Dunlap, which is located on the Guadalupe River about nine miles northwest of Seguin in Guadalupe County.

An acre foot is 325,851 gallons.

The project would require an amendment to the existing state water-right permit now held by the Canyon Regional Water Authority, which currently has rights to only 18.5 acre-feet annually from the Guadalupe at Lake Dunlap.

The project's river water would be supplemented with as much as 5,600 acre-feet annually provided by water wells tapping into the Carrizo Aquifer at the Wells Ranch, which straddles the Gonzales/Guadalupe county line. During drought, nearly all of the water developed by the project would be from groundwater.

The 18-well Wells Ranch water-well field would be developed in partnership with the Bexar Metropolitan Water District, which would draw an additional 3,400 acre-feet of groundwater for its San Antonio-area customers.

Pipelines would carry the project's water to the San Antonio area.

But the Lake Dunlap/Wells Ranch project is being assailed for both its use of river water and its use of underground water.

The Region L description of the project includes this assessment: Reductions in streamflows in the Guadalupe River associated with the Canyon Regional Water Authority amendment. Long-term reductions in aquifer levels.

Bill West, general manager of the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority, said GBRA opposes the Lake Dunlap project.

"The Guadalupe River upstream of Gonzales has been identified for years as having no (unallocated) water being available," West said.

For that reason, he said, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality would not issue the permit expansion necessary for the project, he said.

American Electric Power and Small Hydro of Texas, which hold water rights to Guadalupe River water in the Victoria area, also oppose the project, West said.

Dianne Wassenich, executive director of the San Marcos River Foundation, an environmental group seeking state water rights to protect river flows from the Guadalupe River into coastal bays and estuaries, said that granting additional Guadalupe water for the Lake Dunlap project would be in conflict with the San Marcos River Foundation's pending application for that same water.

"We believe we have prior claim on that water to try to protect the bays and estuaries," Wassenich said.

Tyson Broad of Austin's Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club questioned whether the project is necessary and whether the possible ill-effects on the Guadalupe River have been considered by Region L.

Regional water planner Mike Fields of Victoria, manager of the Coletto Creek electricity generating plant near Fannin, questioned whether Region L should add to its regional water plan a project that would make more demands on the groundwater supplies of Gonzales County.

The amount of projected demand on Gonzales County groundwater - which is already supplying water to in-county users and to the Schertz-Seguin area, and is also being asked to provide water for the San Antonio Water System, the Bexar Metropolitan Water District and the Hays/Caldwell county area - exceeds the amount of water determined by the county's groundwater district to actually be available.

"As a planning group, we can't put together a plan that exceeds what the groundwater district says is available," Fields said.

"It's a problem," acknowledged Region L planning group chairwoman Evelyn Bonavita of San Antonio. "We've got a lot of water being pumped out."

Region L water planner John Kight of Boerne in Kendall County said he believes the planning group is wasting its time in pursuing the project.

"The water's not there, surface- or groundwater-wise," Kight said.

Middleton put it this way: "Why keep putting stuff in a plan that isn't going to work?"

But Region L board members have decided to go ahead with the public-hearing process for the project.

That's because Region L had previously authorized technical studies on how the project would work and had asked for and received state funds to prepare those technical studies.

Water planner Greg Rothe, general manager of the San Antonio River Authority, said he thought it would only be the proper thing to do to allow the project a "fair hearing" through the public-hearing process.

He also pointed out that the project's sponsors expect that Region L will give the project the benefit of the full public process.

The public hearing will be at 6:30 p.m. Oct. 13 at the Canyon Regional Water Authority office at 850 Lakeside Pass in New Braunfels.

Written comments may also be submitted to: Ronald Hernandez, San Antonio River Authority, P.O. Box 839980, San Antonio, Texas. Written comments will be taken through Nov. 14.

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