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## **Ag commissioner: State will need more water as population grows | [myopenforum.com](http://myopenforum.com)**

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By Ruth Campbell

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With Texas' population expected to double by 2050, the state needs to make sure it will have enough water for all those new residents, said Agriculture Commissioner Susan Combs.

"We're going to run out of water if we don't do something quick," Combs told those attending Thursday's John Ben Shepperd Public Leadership Institute forum titled "Aquifers and Acrobats: West Texas Water Polices."

The forum, which also included panelists talking about West Texas water policy, was conducted at the Center for Energy and Economic Diversification (CEED) building. About 20 people attended.

During the next 50 years, Combs said \$108.6 billion would be needed to pay for infrastructure to provide water to municipalities, wastewater and flood control.

Agriculture uses about 70 percent of the state's water, but she said that percentage is declining. She attributes the shrinking use of water to energy costs. Livestock, she said, uses relatively little water.

"I think you'll see a lot of people in agriculture, A) not irrigating and/or B) if they are irrigating doing something more efficient," she said. She added this may mean losing a commodity like rice.

"Enormous needs are coming. We are conserving like crazy. The challenge for rural West Texas is not to get into a zero-sum game, meaning I'm going to win and you're going to lose," she said.

Many of the issues in limbo today, such as groundwater conservation districts, would have been addressed by Senate Bill 3, left unpassed by the state Legislature. Many groundwater conservation districts lack funding for third-party studies on how much water they have and where it is.

In 2007, she said she thinks the state will see a lot happen on water. "I hope we're ready to talk about it; I hope we're ready for solutions," she said.

During the first part of the forum, Kevin Ward, executive administrator of the Texas Water Development Board, and John Grant, general manager of the Colorado River Municipal Water District, spoke.

An attractive future source of water, Ward said, would be water desalinization and treating brackish water. He said there is an estimated 2.7 billion acre feet of groundwater in Texas. An acre-foot of water is 326,000 gallons of water - enough for three families or 10 people for a year.

El Paso is building a desalinization plant that would serve Fort Bliss. This would be the largest in the state. Currently, that honor belongs to a facility near Brownsville, he said.

Ward said every aquifer in the state has brackish water in it and technology should help bring down the cost of making it potable.

"In your area when you start looking at minor aquifers, you're getting 54 and 64 million gallons of water," he said.

A way to extend the water we have, Grant said, is reclamation. CRMWD has identified three possible projects in Odessa-Midland, Big Spring and Snyder. "If we move forward, we'll start with the Big Spring project because that's the most economical and makes the most sense," he said.

Price tag for the Big Spring project would be close to \$8 million and improved technology might further reduce the cost. Grant said the water district would seek federal or state grants or low-interest loans for the venture.

With reclamation, water would go through the wastewater treatment process and before it goes into the creeks and rivers, it would be run through a reverse osmosis process and disinfected and de-mineralized.

Grant said the Colorado River Municipal Water District, has about 464,000-acre feet

of water in Lake Thomas, Spence and Ivy Reservoir. It provides about 80,000-acre feet of water annually. Most of its water is surface so the "biggest user" is evaporation.

"We can evaporate over 100,000 acre feet a year," he said.

The CRMWD also has one of the oldest weather modification programs in the country, having started it in 1971.