

The Texas Observer Editorial

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It's Politics by a Knockout

Forty years ago, in the aftermath of the worst drought Texas has ever seen, the state made its first stab at water planning. "It is becoming increasingly apparent," the state's engineers wrote in that first-ever water plan, "that orderless and unintegrated treatment of water problems should not be tolerated." This was 1961, a time of great optimism about applying rational principles to government, about the project of bringing order to the mad and selfish scramble of politicians. Planning was the great antidote to politics.

The results of the state's latest round of water planning are in: Politics wins again, and planning is rumored to have thrown the fight. The 1997 Legislature brought that great Nineties concept, devolution, to the water planning process, allowing each of the state's sixteen planning regions to assess its own needs. This marginally improved public input in the process, but it was also an invitation to pork-barrel politics, one that was graciously accepted by all parties involved. The resulting plans, approved and cobbled together by the Texas Water Development Board, are larded up with so many unnecessary dams, reservoirs and pipelines, you'd think they were letters to Santa from the state's big civil engineering companies, which many of them were (see "Drowned by Dallas" this issue.) Texas environmentalists have learned that the way to get attention in this state is to talk about fiscal responsibility and taxes. The National Wildlife Federation has targeted six of the most egregiously expensive and unneeded projects, with a total price tag of \$3.5 billion in taxpayer funds. In each case, the group argues, projected water needs could be met more cheaply through existing resources, or through the one strategy conspicuously absent from the plan: conservation. Other western states are way ahead of Texas in conservation, as Char Miller observes in his introduction to a new historical survey of water in the west, *Fluid Arguments*, which Miller edited. "The huge new source of water for the city of Los Angeles," the director of LA's water department discovered, "was the water we were wasting."

The state's regional planning groups were under no obligation to include conservation in their strategies, and with a few notable exceptions, such as the Valley, they largely didn't. Dallas leads the pack in irresponsibility. While most of the state's cities projected decreased per capita water use in the future, in Dallas, which already has the highest per capita use in the state, planners predicted that the figure would increase. Incredibly, regional planners did not see fit to include any conservation measures in their plan, which relies instead largely on the construction of a \$1.7 billion dollar reservoir and pipeline project on the Sulphur River in east Texas. Was this really the most economical use of the state's resources? Don't ask the Water Development Board. High ranking planning officials have repeatedly asserted that they have no role in assessing the feasibility or efficiency of the regional plans. "They have taken that position based on their interpretation of the legislature's intent," said Ken Kramer of the Texas Sierra Club. "But we don't agree. We feel that there's compelling state interest in protecting our tax dollars

and our resources from misuse." The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department is equally skeptical. Last year, executive director Andy Sansom sent the Board an exhaustive nine-page letter taking the regional plans to task for failing to take into account wildlife water needs and for their general disregard for conservation. Sansom went out on a limb with that letter to defend what he considered his agency's charge. When will the Texas Water Development Board do the same?