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**LCRA, SAWS plan will promote water conservation on farms**

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BAY CITY - An important part of the Lower Colorado River Authority and San Antonio Water System's plan to capture and pipe water from three counties along the Colorado River is to promote water conservation on farms, including a new rice variety that uses less water to grow.

Thursday night LCRA unveiled six potential sites for 7,000-to 10,000-acre retention ponds that are the backbone of its ambitious water project that is touted as one of the biggest water conservation efforts in the state. The sites were located in Colorado, Wharton and Matagorda counties.

In an open-house style meeting at the Bay City Civic Center, representatives from LCRA and the San Antonio Water System were on hand to answer questions from landowners and the general public about the project that is in its third year of a six-year study to determine the project's environmental and technical feasibility.

"This project not only is designed to develop new water supplies, it would be one of the biggest water conservation efforts that we know of in the state. We believe this is in line with what conservationists are seeking," said Bill McCann, LCRA manager of corporate communication.

Maps of six proposed sites for retention ponds where the LCRA may, by the year 2020, capture excess and unused river flows and then pipe it to San Antonio for drinking water were on display.

If the project is deemed viable and is approved, the retention ponds will be augmented with a series of groundwater pumping sites to provide water when surface water is lacking, according to an LCRA press release.

An important part of the plan is agriculture water conservation, said Lara Jarrett, project planner with CH2M Hill, an Austin consulting company hired by LCRA to participate in the study.

The project will provide money from SAWS for rice farmers to laser level rice fields to help promote water conservation, Jarrett said.

Farmers also will be encouraged to grow a new variety of rice that is being developed that has a longer growing period and will produce a higher yield, so that a second flooding and rice harvest will not be necessary, said Mark Jordan, LCRA water management.

"We're trying to make it possible for farmers to get a good production out of the first crop, because of cheaper water cost. We're going to make it possible for them to grow more rice cheaper without the need for a second crop."

The harvest from the new rice variety, which is still under development, would not equal the yield of a two-crop rice harvest, but the lower water cost should make up the lost revenue a second crop would bring, he said.

A study to determine the freshwater needs for the Matagorda Bay system is still under way, said Leah Manning, LCRA program manager for the LCRA-SAWS Water Project.

Matthew Sloan, a Bay City attorney representing the interests of shrimp and oyster harvesters, asked what would happen if once the project is under way, it is then determined that inadequate fresh water was feeding the Matagorda Bay system.

"If indeed they find out that diversion of water has a detrimental effect on the bay, can it stop?" Sloan said.

"Something will have to be done," Jordan said. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers still needs to make a determination whether an environmental impact statement is required, said Jarrett.

But whether or not an impact statement is ordered, the LCRA already is conducting a socio-economic impact study to determine any indirect impacts on the environment and economy of the area, Jarrett said.

"I think it's a really great process," said L. G. Raum, a Wharton County farmer. "I believe that if the studies come out that it's not sustainable - not good for the river - then I don't think it will be done."

"We really do want people to tell us if there are issues or comments," said Dennis Daniel, an LCRA risk control manager.

The next open houses will be 6 to 8 p.m. May 22, . at the Colorado County Fair Complex in Columbus and 6 to 8 p.m. May 25, 6 to 8 p.m. at the El Campo Civic Center in El Campo.

More information is available, including aerial photographs and maps of proposed retention pond sites, at [www.lcra.org/lswp](http://www.lcra.org/lswp).