

Though a popular boating and fishing recreation area, Lubbock-owned Lake Alan Henry was planned as a future source of drinking water. Lubbock is considering beginning construction soon of a \$200 million pipeline from the lake, which is 65 miles southeast of the city.

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\$70 MILLION FISHING HOLE

West Texas lake goes untapped for its water

Bass anglers enjoy more benefits than residents of distant Lubbock

By MARK BABINECK

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JUSTICEBURG - Decades of political infighting, lawsuits and questionable planning have culminated in a West Texas reservoir that, so far, has been little more than a \$70 million fishing hole.

But at least the bass are biting at Lake Alan Henry.

"I've fished all over the state of Texas in fishing tournaments, and there's not a lake in this state that compares to it, acre for acre," said Lake Alan Henry guide Phillip Pool.

Lubbock didn't dam the south fork of the Brazos River's Double Mountain Fork to create a bass hot spot.

But the reservoir, planned since the early 1970s as a future source of drinking water, appeared to become unneeded when Lubbock and 10 other cities recently secured more than a century's worth of Panhandle groundwater.

Yet Lubbock, signaling how precious water is on semiarid plains, is considering beginning construction soon of a pipeline from the lake, even though the cost of moving the water 65 miles and 1,000 feet uphill is among its most expensive supply options and would dwarf the price of the reservoir itself.

Gary Boren, a Lubbock city councilman who focuses on water matters, said the region's largest city can't have enough sources to quench its growing thirst.

"When you live on the edge of the great Chihuahuan Desert, water is the No. 1 priority, and it always will be," he said, explaining why the city could begin drawing up to 7.2 billion gallons annually from the lake within six years.

A 2002 engineering report submitted to the Texas Water Development Board estimated it will cost nearly \$200 million, adjusted for inflation, to build treatment facilities and a pipeline from Lake Alan Henry to Lubbock and nearly \$30 million a year to operate them.

That comes to \$4.13 per 1,000 gallons. By comparison, water from Lake Meredith and underground reserves north of Amarillo cost Lubbock 83 cents per 1,000 gallons, according to Kent Satterwhite, general manager of the Canadian River Municipal Water Authority.

Satterwhite said his agency has member cities' needs covered for at least 110 years, thanks to the Panhandle groundwater acquisitions.

Nonetheless, he said he thinks Lubbock is correct to pursue water from Lake Alan Henry.

Mineral rights fight

Lubbock identified the site in 1971 and set in motion a plan to build the lake by the mid-1980s.

But landowner lawsuits delayed parcel acquisition for years, and the lake bottom wasn't entirely in government control until 1992, according to a history of the project written by now-retired Texas Tech professor Otis Templer.

By then, another problem had arisen: Lubbock had bought the land but failed to acquire some of the mineral rights, which were necessary because flooding the valley would prevent future oil drilling of the lake bed.

"They did it too quickly," said Garza County Judge Giles Dalby. "I kept telling them, 'You've got to do something about these minerals.' "

One dispute led to a court award of nearly \$9 million for two rights-holders, according to published reports.

A Dallas oilman also refused to sell even as the lake began to fill behind the dam, and an environmental crisis loomed as water and unplugged oil wells threatened to mix.

Dalby — whose family had some oil production of its own inundated by the reservoir — mediated a \$1.6 million settlement to be paid to oilman Bert Fields Jr. in 2000, ending a four-year battle and finally settling the lake's ownership.

Demand for water

As a scenic lake emerged four miles east of Justiceburg, a virtual ghost town best-known as the birthplace of late Detroit Tigers star Norm Cash, the next conflict arose.

Residential development had begun to sprout on former badlands that suddenly had awe-inspiring views of the azure waters. Ironically, the new lake's neighbors needed water.

Trouble is, Lubbock owned the lake water and wanted to keep it for its residents.

"Negotiating a lot of this stuff, it didn't go well," Dalby said. However, he complimented Lubbock city government for finally agreeing to sell a sliver of its allocation to users around Lake Alan Henry, which is named for a former Lubbock mayor.

The deal solved the last major conflict between Lubbock and residents near Justiceburg.

Godsend for fishermen

One of those water users is J.R. Ortiz, who splits his time between a home in Lubbock and his Hook 'Em Guide Service at the lake.

For all the tribulations leading to its construction, including what he called the "big boo-boo" regarding mineral rights, Ortiz said the lake has been a godsend for avid bass fishermen like himself.

Because all the trees and scrub were left intact and now inhabit the lake bottom, Ortiz said the reservoir has become a perfect breeding ground for nutrients upon which bass thrive.

"They stocked it with a ... Florida-strain bass. It's a behemoth. They just grow and grow," said Ortiz, who added that he has guided fishermen from across the country who have trekked to West Texas in search of prize bass.

He and fellow guide Pool predict the rising growth rate of the bass and the catch-and-release nature of sportfishing practically guarantee someone there will catch a largemouth eclipsing the state record of 18.18 pounds.

Lake Alan Henry has produced more 13-pound bass than any other Texas lake during the past two springs in the statewide ShareLunker competition.

Only time will tell whether Lubbock water users will benefit as much as bass anglers.

Offsetting costs

Current rates in Lubbock would not cover the estimated cost of bringing Lake Alan Henry water into the city, much less distributing it.

A recent report by radio station KJBL warned that rates could skyrocket if the lake is tapped, though Councilman Boren said efficiencies in local government and a growing tax base will help defray costs.

"Basically, what we've done on council over the last three years is lower the tax rate to offset higher appraisals," Boren said, noting the city also profits from its electric utility. "We have kept the cost of doing business in Lubbock low, which has really spurred growth."

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