

Low lake level likely to drive water bills up

SANFORD - Lubbock water customers could face higher bills beginning in October after the city's principal water supplier chose to increase the amount of costlier groundwater it sends to its customers.

Higher energy prices and low lake water levels are making next year look expensive for both the Canadian River Municipal Water Authority, which supplies more than 80 percent of the city's water, and Lubbock.

While the authority's governing board chose not to reduce the amount of water it committed to provide to its 11 customer cities in 2006 - despite a proposal from Lubbock Mayor David Miller and a withering reservoir - each day without rain pushes the authority closer to cuts in 2007.

Lubbock would make up any difference with additional water from its 50-year-old well fields in Bailey County, and has recently commissioned engineering studies to determine how heavily that source could be tapped.

"Every day that passes, it becomes more likely," Deputy City Manager Tom Adams said.

Water levels at Lake Meredith, once Lubbock's main water source, have fallen for more than a year and set record lows every day in June.

Board members Wednesday could have reduced the billions of gallons of blended lake water and well water the authority is committed to send to its member cities for the rest of the year to help the lake recover.

Directors chose instead to change the water supply's blend. The authority will pipe an even mix of well water and lake water, rather than the 55 percent lake and 45 percent well mix that was set previously.

The authority has made adding pumps in its newly acquired Roberts County well fields a priority and can make up for a drop in lake water so cities will not have to scramble to make up for cuts this year.

"We would have been in a world of hurt" without the well fields, said Chad Pernell, authority deputy general manager. "No one ever envisioned we'd have to use it this quickly, this much."

But even though the authority plans to ultimately increase its well water capabilities another 50 percent, Wednesday's action is a short-term solution.

Groundwater can take hundreds of years to replace and is considered non-renewable. Energy costs are 88 percent higher to pull groundwater to the surface than to pump lake water.

The new mix is 34 percent more expensive than the old one, an extra \$130,000, according to authority figures. That will not be passed on to city water customers this fiscal year, which ends in October, Adams said.

Energy costs also helped push the authority into its largest budget. Lubbock's estimated cost increased more than \$1.2 million in next year's authority budget, driven mostly by energy prices and paying off debt related to heavy investment in groundwater.

"We want every drop to come from Lake Meredith," Pernell said.

In maintaining the current levels of water, directors also chose not to act on a suggestion from Mayor Miller, one of the meeting attendees.

He asked that the board consider a little more than 2 percent reduction in the authority's allocation to cities to make any downward trends in supply more gradual and to send a message about conservation.

"If we're going to change the lifestyles and the mind-sets of people, those of us with habits who love to water three, four, five times a week, I do think, sir, that CRMWA might be doing us all a favor, not to push the panic button" but to make a slight reduction, Miller told the board.

Directors were supportive of conservation but a majority did not believe it was the supplier's place to send what was an essentially political message if there was water available.

Miller later said he supported the board's decision and was asking about, not recommending, such a reduction.

Tom Edmonds, a board member from the industry-heavy town of Borger, agreed with the proposal but later joined the unanimous vote to keep the water levels.

Cities needed to be more conservative in water planning and he expected directors to have the option to lower the allocation for the rest of the year when they meet again in October, Edmonds said.

"We're never quite satisfied that we have all our bases covered," he said. "We're OK right now, but let's not get too frisky."

In other authority action, directors approved Tahoka and Slaton's participation in debt payments for groundwater reserves.

The move allows the two cities to own a share of the water the authority has secured under 300,000 acres of the northern Panhandle. It will not directly reduce the cost to Lubbock or any other member city who is already paying debt service, but payments from the two cities will be reimbursed to the other members.

Tahoka has already approved a resolution to participate in the program; the authority had not yet received a similar resolution from Slaton.