

COMMENTARY

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Johns: Austinites, help save a river

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NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION

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Last month, the Austin City Council took a big step toward making Austin the kind of environmentally friendly city many of us want it to be. The council unanimously voted to push for more water conservation, with the goal of a 10 percent reduction in peak use over 10 years. The move is a bid to save money and buy time while a new water treatment plant can be constructed.

That is sound thinking, but there is another reason we should use water more efficiently: the continued health of the Colorado River and Matagorda Bay depend on it.

Unfortunately, a recent survey showed most of us don't know where our tap water comes from, much less understand the implications of using too much of it. Almost all of Austin's water comes from the Colorado River, via Lake Travis, Lake Austin and Town Lake.

Austin's water use has a big impact on Travis' levels and subsequently on the river downstream. In a dry year, Lake Travis drops from lack of rain. We water our lawns more to keep them green, and the water flowing from our hoses lowers the lake even more. But studies show that about half of the water we Texans use on our lawns is wasted. For example, if we had watered our lawns more efficiently during the drought of 1999-2000, Lake Travis would have finished the summer of 2000 about 2 or 3 feet higher.

Year in and year out, the city's water use affects the lake's level significantly. The levels in Lake Travis in turn determine the amount of water passed through for the Colorado River downstream and Matagorda Bay.

Below Austin, the Colorado flows for about another 300 river miles before it empties into Matagorda Bay. The river and its banks are home to many kinds of wildlife: bald eagles, kingfishers, beavers, even the occasional mountain lion. The area is an emerging spot for fishing, kayaking and canoeing.

We owe it not only to ourselves but to our downstream neighbors such as Bastrop and Smithville to be good stewards of the river.

As it flows into Matagorda Bay, water from the river mixes with salt water from the Gulf of Mexico.

It's surprising so few Austinites have discovered Matagorda Bay. It is arguably the best place in the entire country for birdwatching. The bay supports an incredibly productive commercial and recreational fishery - oysters, shrimp, redfish, flounder - and it has nice beaches, too.

Matagorda Bay's vast ecological bounty is largely dependant on freshwater flowing in from the Colorado River. We in Austin play a large role in determining if the river and the bay get the water they need.

Lawn watering isn't the only way Austinites could use water more efficiently. The fact is, our per-person water use is fairly high. The state's 2003 water use survey showed that of Texas' five largest cities, only Dallas used more water per person. We could do much better without serious sacrifice.

As Austin's population and water use grow, Lake Travis will be lower more frequently. This will not only be a challenge for recreation and public safety on the lake, but the Colorado River and Matagorda Bay will suffer as well.

Even though the water conservation resolution passed unanimously, some at City Hall seem to be wringing their hands, wondering if water conservation will work and if Austinites will buy into it. Water conservation does work, and we are confident the people of Austin are up to the challenge.

A 10 percent savings is eminently achievable; other cities, including San Antonio, have reduced their water use more and more quickly. We can do this and we must.

We need to spread the word, not only about how to conserve water, but also about why it matters. Saving water does more than save money, it helps protect the river and the bay, for all of us to enjoy.

Johns is a water resources scientist with the National Wildlife Federation in Austin.