

TCEQ chair urges water conservation during drought

By **KATHLEEN HARTNETT WHITE**

IT IS NO SURPRISE that a Texas summer is hot and dry but 2005-2006 has been the driest recorded since 1957. The National Weather Services predicts persistent drought conditions through October for more than two-thirds of the state. We began the summer with a deficit. At the end of June, the state's reservoirs were at 79 percent of capacity, which is 10 percent lower than the same time last year.

The typically long, hot Texas summers readily bring water to mind, but Texans need to recognize the long-term water needs of our growing state. According to a 2006 preliminary analysis of Regional Water Plans, by 2060 when our population will have doubled, Texas could have extreme water shortages. In 2060, 61 percent of the population in over 500 cities would be unable to meet basic water needs during drought unless we reduce current rates of water use or develop additional sources of water. Every Texan can help conserve water - this summer and throughout the year.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality requires water suppliers to develop drought contingency plans to manage water usage, reduce peak demand and extend supplies. June ended with 119 community water systems asking customers to limit outside water usage. An additional 78 systems were added to the list as of July 28. Of these systems, 22 are not allowing any outside watering at all, 104 are requiring mandatory watering restrictions based on address and day of the week, and 71 are asking for their customers to voluntarily reduce usage.

You may receive notices from your local water supplier about water restrictions. The TCEQ breaks down restrictions into four stages. Under Stage I and II restrictions, customers are asked to conserve water. Mandatory restrictions come into play in Stage III and involve limiting lawn watering to specific days of the week and prohibit other non-essential water use to reduce the demand on the system by a certain percentage. If these efforts fail to sufficiently reduce usage, Stage IV restrictions may be implemented. These critical water use restrictions prohibit all outdoor watering and using water to wash vehicles of any kind. However, one size does not fit all situations in our big, diverse state. Since local decisions best reflect local conditions, restrictions issued by your water system may vary.

There's no need to wait until conditions are dire. Conservation keeps a bad situation from worsening. There are things each individual Texan can do to conserve water. Some ways to reduce water usage are:

- water your lawn no more than twice a week and only during early morning hours,
- use a drip irrigation system instead of sprinklers, t wash full loads of dishes or laundry,
- cut back on washing your vehicle, t replace old plumbing with water saving fixtures,
- consider installing a cistern to catch rainwater for future use,
- plant native plants (that require less water).

The "Know Your Water I.Q. program at www.watერიq.org is an excellent resource for learning more about water conservation. Cities and communities across Texas are joining the "Water IQ" program to increase public awareness of the need to use water more efficiently.

As a rancher, I know that nature does not always cooperate. Population growth coupled with increased demand in a dry climate make it imperative that each Texan makes every effort to conserve water. Our quality of life depends upon our wise use of this precious and limited resource. Texas is blessed with tremendous water resources in our many rivers and aquifers. Let's all use them wisely.

Kathleen Hartnett White is chairman of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality