

Save Water, Save Money, Save the Refuge

Modern toilet: \$120.

Efficient showerhead: \$17.

Saving Texas' incredible natural heritage: Priceless.

There are some things money can't buy. One of those things is a replacement for some of the last and best bottomland hardwood forests in Texas.

Bottomland forests—majestic wooded wetlands created where rivers and streams regularly overflow their banks—are home to over 1500 different types of plants and animals and are the most diverse ecosystem type found in Texas.

Particularly prized by ducks and other waterfowl, these wetland forests also function as nature's flood protection and water filtration system. Over the last two hundred years, as much as three-quarters of the bottomland forests in East Texas have been lost.

Just southeast of Tyler, however, there is an area where the bottomlands remain in their full glory, still nurtured by the natural ebb and flow of the Neches River.

In the words of a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service spokesperson, the site is “a gem,” unmatched for its wildlife value.

Last summer, with overwhelming support from East Texans, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced a new national wildlife refuge to forever protect this area.

The City of Dallas has other plans for the site. In your name, they have gone to court to demand the right to dam the river and drown the forest to provide water for St. Augustine lawns.

Never mind that there's another way to provide a secure source of water for Dallas' future, save the ratepayers money, and avoid flooding a national wildlife refuge.

The fact is, very little of the water from the proposed Fastrill reservoir is needed. According to state projections, by 2060 if there were an extreme drought, Dallas might need 7 percent of the water provided by the reservoir.

Reservoirs like Fastrill do not come cheap—it would cost Dallas ratepayers \$569 million to construct, and that figure does not even include treatment and distribution costs for the water.

There is another, cheaper source of “new” water: conservation. Dallas' per person residential water use is among the highest in the state, with much of it going for lawns.

By providing incentives to reduce per person water use just 1% annually over the long term, the Dallas Water Utility could save around 224,000 acre-feet of water a year.

Even if fully used, Fastrill Reservoir would provide half that amount—112,000 acre-feet.

Getting those savings would just mean instituting the same kind of sensible programs already proven to work in other cities in Texas and across the country.

For example, the city of San Antonio has cut per person residential water use from about 225 gallons per day in 1982 to around 140 gallons today. (In Dallas, the average daily use is currently around 240 gallons.)

How did San Antonio do it? Through an innovative voucher program, almost half of the city's older, water-guzzling toilets have been replaced with new, more efficient models. The water utility also has a strongly tiered rate structure, so heavy users pay more which encourages them to use less.

Efficient clothes washers, shower heads and other items are also eligible for rebates. In addition, they've encouraged smarter lawn watering, which in the summer accounts for about half of residential water use.

Water conservation is comparatively inexpensive. San Antonio estimates it has saved \$7 in avoided new water supply costs for every \$1 spent on conservation.

So far, however, Dallas' leaders are planning to spend your money on lawyers instead of low-flow toilets and on flooding a wildlife refuge instead of funding water conservation.

That's a shame.

With a serious commitment to increased efficiency, Dallas could have water to grow, the national wildlife refuge could be saved, and Dallas ratepayers would save money.

Everyone wins, except the lawyers. How about it Dallas?