

Report: Conservation could save more water than proposed weir

[By MELISSA McEVER - The Brownsville Herald](#)

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If the Rio Grande Valley's cities adopted water conservation measures they might not need new reservoirs, including the proposed Brownsville Weir, to meet water needs, according to a report.

Water conservation plans, similar to those implemented in San Antonio, could save the Valley as much water as that new reservoir would hold, a National Wildlife Federation report released Monday, said.

The report, "Save Water, Save Rivers, Save Money," argues that if the region's cities reduced municipal use to 140 gallons per person, per day, the region could save an additional 80,000 acre feet of water each year. The entire state eventually could save 1 million acre-feet of water annually if each user reduced consumption by 1 percent per year, the report states.

An acre foot is roughly equivalent to 326,000 gallons.

The report refers to the proposed Brownsville Weir as an "unjustified dam." The weir would yield more than 20,000 acre feet of water per year, while conservation strategies could yield almost 28,000 acre feet, the researchers say.

San Antonio reduced per capita water consumption from 225 to 140 gallons per day in 25 years by adopting certain conservation strategies, said Norman Johns, a water-resources scientist for the National Wildlife Federation and lead researcher for the report.

These strategies included replacing older toilets, providing low-flow shower heads to customers, restricting lawn watering and offering rebates to customers who cut their water consumption, he said.

"We used San Antonio as a template for what could be done in the rest of the state," Johns said. "If a major municipality could do it, there's a reasonable expectation that others could too."

By encouraging individual conservation, the state might need fewer new reservoirs to store water, the researchers say. The organization has expressed concerns about new reservoirs' impact on wildlife.

The weir has the potential to increase the Rio Grande's salinity downstream and harm fish and wildlife, the report says. In addition, so much water already is diverted from the river that its health is already in question, said Myron Hess, manager of the federation's Texas Water Program.

"Anything that reduces the flow and allows it to silt up again is a concern," Hess said.

But the weir project is needed to meet water needs in Brownsville and free up water for agricultural use, Glenn Jarvis, chairman of the Rio Grande Regional Water Planning Group, said.

The Brownsville Weir and Reservoir would store 6,000 acre feet of water from the Rio Grande and divert additional water for municipal use. The Brownsville Public Utilities Board has obtained

federal and state permits for the project but hasn't yet begun construction, said PUB spokeswoman Lucy Hernandez. PUB officials are still in discussions with Mexico about the project, and no starting date has been set, she said.

Hernandez said PUB officials couldn't comment on the report because they hadn't yet seen it, but she said that the city already has implemented several conservation strategies, including replacement of leaky pipelines and consumer education. Even with conservation, the weir is still a necessary project, Hernandez said.

The water planning group, the citizens' group in charge of developing water management strategies for the Valley and four other counties, included the Brownsville Weir in its latest recommendations. Because the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality has granted a permit for the project, and that permit requires certain environmental concessions, the water planning group is satisfied the project poses no major risk to wildlife, Jarvis said.

"We recommended that cities practice water conservation - it's an assumption that underlies our recommendations," Jarvis said. "The weir is still needed."