

State editorial roundup

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Fort Worth Star-Telegram on Texas and water:

Water is precious, as Texans who suffered through the 1950s Drought From Hell can attest. But gigantic new reservoirs are pricey. The estimated cost of the proposed Marvin Nichols Reservoir in Northeast Texas, which would provide water for the Dallas-Fort Worth area by 2030, is a staggering \$2.16 billion.

Precisely because water is precious and reservoirs are costly, fast-growing North Central Texas should greatly expand conservation and reuse to help ensure an ample long-term supply. That's important because the population of a 16-county metropolitan area -- including Dallas, Tarrant, Denton and Collin counties -- is projected to roughly double to more than 13 million residents by 2060.

Even if conservation and reuse are significantly expanded, the 62,000-acre Nichols reservoir probably will be needed. But stepped-up conservation and reuse could at least delay the need for building Nichols or buying other new supplies of water.

In May, the Legislature passed a major water bill that included Nichols as a prospective future water source. Opponents of Nichols said that Dallas and Fort Worth, which have higher consumption rates than other big Texas cities, should focus on conservation and reuse rather than building a reservoir that would submerge vast chunks of hardwood bottomlands and destroy wildlife habitat.

Regardless of your take on Nichols, one thing should be clear: We must stop wasting water, as we often do in countless ways, including inefficient and excessive irrigation of lawns and by using more water than needed for bathing, washing clothes and cleaning dishes.

North Central Texas cities and water districts need to establish stronger conservation and reuse programs, provide more incentives for both and better educate the general public about why they are important.

Fort Worth has changed residential billing rates so that high-volume users pay more per gallon for consumption above specified levels. The city also is requiring that new sprinkler systems have sensors that shut them down when it rains or freezes.

Numerous cities have banned irrigation of lawns from hours such as 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. during warm-weather months. They also are educating residents about lawn irrigation techniques that waste less water and are recommending more drought-resistant landscaping.

The Tarrant Regional Water District, which supplies Fort Worth, Arlington and other Tarrant cities, is proposing tougher restrictions on water usage during dry spells.

The district also has begun a successful program under which Trinity River water that has been used in the D-FW area, treated at area sewage plants and sent downstream is filtered through cleansing wetlands bordering the district's Richland-Chambers Reservoir in East Texas. The water then goes into the reservoir and can be pumped back to Tarrant County cities for treatment and consumption.

Cities also can expand programs to reuse water for purposes such as irrigating parks and golf courses.

On Tuesday, Fort Worth Water Department officials informed City Council members that they expect to propose a variety of measures to encourage greater conservation. The Star-Telegram recently reported that the city's system is plagued by an excess of leaky pipes that waste water and by faulty, aged meters that cause inaccurate billing.

The Austin City Council recently approved a variety of aggressive conservation measures to be implemented over the next several years to curb consumption by homeowners, commercial laundries, car washes and other water users. Higher standards will be required for everything from sprinkler systems to plumbing fixtures.

Austin already gives residents free low-flow shower heads, helps pay for low-flow toilets and provides \$100 rebates for water- and energy-saving washers. The city even sells rain barrels at discounted prices. San Antonio and El Paso provide some similar conservation incentives.

Under a long-term water plan adopted in 2006 for 16 D-FW area counties, an estimated 28 percent of the region's needs would be met by a variety of conservation and reuse strategies.

It would be great if the region could exceed that goal for conservation and reuse. As we said, water is precious.