

## **SAWS project estimated cost rises**

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A meeting updating the public on a study of a water-sharing plan for the Colorado River basin and the San Antonio area revealed that cost estimates have more than doubled since the study began six years ago, while the estimated quantity of water produced from the plan has declined.

The LCRA-SAWS project, which was launched following a State of Texas Water Planning effort in early 2000, is in its fourth year and cost estimates have increased to \$2.4 billion, up from a preliminary estimate when the study began of less than \$1 billion.

The project update meeting was held on Oct. 30 in El Campo.

The preliminary results discussed at the meeting caused some, including Matagorda County Judge Nate McDonald, to suggest the study be expanded to include other alternatives for addressing the county's and San Antonio's projected coming water shortage.

The San Antonio Water System is paying more than \$40 million to the Lower Colorado River Authority for the studies recommended by the Region K water planning group, one of 16 separate water regions in the state.

Region K, which includes Matagorda, Colorado and Wharton counties and the Austin area, recognized there would be a water shortage over the 50-year planning period in the lower Colorado River basin, said Haskell Simon, vice chairman of Region K, in an interview.

"We determined that because of growth in Austin, Travis and Williamson counties, and their projected demand for water, we would be short in our basin," Simon said.

The recommended plan was a collaboration between Region K and Regional L to address the projected water shortages in both regions, Simon said.

Region L includes the San Antonio Water System, or SAWS.

"At the same time, San Antonio, in Region L, projected a shortage of over 300,000 acre feet of water," he said.

A Region L study included 12 strategies that acquired water from Region K, including one that dammed the Colorado River.

"Our goal was to develop strategies for water shortage, but also to preempt Region L from coming and developing water in our region, i. e., ground water or dam the Colorado River," Simon said.

The partnership with SAWS would give the region the money that it needed to construct the off-channel reservoirs, research agricultural conservation and develop ground water for agriculture use in Region K to meet a projected 170,000-acre shortfall in water supplies, Simon said.

But recent announcements of major industry and residents coming to Matagorda County may

make the 7-year-old predictions obsolete, and desalination should be added to the study, said McDonald in an interview.

"How are the needs going to be met?" McDonald said he asked the LCRA and SAWS representatives at the update meeting in El Campo recently. "What happens in 20 to 25 years when we have sucked all the water out of the Colorado River? What happens if we've taken all the ground water?"

The project first was estimated to cost around \$800 million, Simon said. Predictions now are putting it closer to \$2.4 billion.

Added to that is the decline in the amount of acre feet of water that the project would produce - an estimated 91,000 acre feet of water, from an original estimate of 150,000 acre feet.

With the information we have today, the study should include desalination, McDonald said.

"We've got the money, we've got the know-how, we've got the best minds in the world," he said. "You've got to think big, and you've got to think long-term."

Time to take action with a strategy to increase available water is a concern to Simon, also.

"My question is, if LCRA-SAWS is not approved, we're still faced with a water shortage in the lower basin, because of population increase in Austin," Simon said. "How will we in Matagorda and the rest of the lower basin, get the water that we need?"

Developing brackish underground water with desalination is an option that should be considered, Simon said.

He made the suggestion at the last Region K Water Development meeting. Global warming and the potential effects it may have on the drought of record is another concern.

McDonald said that he hopes the study can be amended to include desalination of gulf water.

But SAWS agreed to pay for the study - and if the results of the study determined the plan viable - would pay for the improvements needed to implement the plan in the lower basin counties, Simon said.