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Volunteers mark 10 years of water planning

[From staff reports](#)

Bay City Tribune

Published April 16, 2008

This land is your land, this land is my land.

Switch 'river' for 'land' and that familiar refrain rings true for 22 volunteer water planners in the lower Colorado River region in Texas.

Over the past 10 years, they have realized and spread the word that everyone in the 14-county region, from Goldwaite to the Gulf Coast, depends on the water flowing through the Colorado River and its tributaries. From farms to cities to fisheries, the river is your river - and it's their river, too.

These volunteers came together in April 1998 as part of a new grass-roots water planning effort mandated by the 77th Legislature in Senate Bill 1.

For the previous 30 years, the state had developed water plans that that failed because they lacked buy-in at the local level.

The Lower Colorado River (Region K) Water Planning Group is one of 16 regions created by the Texas Water Development Board in 1998 to carry out the "bottom-up" approach required by Senate Bill 1.

Successful planning was necessary, water experts warned, because water shortages loom large in this state with its limited water supplies, vulnerability to drought and rapid population growth.

Over the next two years, the Region K group canvassed the interests of all stakeholders and built a comprehensive, 50-year regional water plan that would become part of a statewide plan.

Counties, cities, agriculture, small businesses, industries, water utilities, electric generating utilities, water districts, recreation, environmental interests - all needs had to be met.

The differences among Region K planners were challenging, but they brought to the table a common concern.

Region L, which includes the San Antonio area, was looking at a broad spectrum of water sources to quench its thirst.

The Colorado River was one of them.

"San Antonio was looking at multiple targets in our basin to extract water to their region and none of them

benefited our basin," said John Burke, Bastrop based Region K chairman and Aqua Water Supply general manager.

Since the state advocated interregional cooperation, Region K planners used foresight, taking into account Region L's needs while protecting and benefiting the lower Colorado River basin.

They consider a proposed project with the San Antonio Water System (SAWS) as a major achievement in interregional water planning.

"everybody was working together, all the interest groups from Goldwithe to Bay City," Burke said.

"The proposed project may not be a solution that's perfect for everybody, but I believe it would be the most beneficial solution for our basin."

Burke has chaired the group from the beginning.

He and other members who have served in the group for 10 years regard regional planning as a challenge and a success.

Their work isn't finished.

The plan has to be updated every five years with new and better information.

The next plan is scheduled for completion in 2011.

Jim Barho, upper Highland Lakes and environmental interests representative, said he's impressed by the complexities of protecting the lakes, making sure the bays and estuaries of the Gulf Coast get the freshwater they need and looking after small communities that depend on groundwater.

The needs are diverse and competitive but the process helps build understanding, Barho said.

"I'm so please with what's happened in Region K," said Barho, Burnet County emergency management coordinator.

"Prior to this, each of us focused on a single interest, not on the system as a whole. We were forced to work together as a team and make concessions to achieve a balance."

Haskell Simon, Matagorda County rice producer, estimates he has traveled close to 90,000 miles and attended about 300 meetings during his 10 years in the group and encourages public interest in the process.

"I hope people in general will watch very closely whether the LCRA-SAWS project is determined viable," Simon said.

"Hopefully, it will provide for the predicted shortages. If it's not adopted, then the question is, 'what will we do?' We'll still be faced with water shortages. We'll have to make decisions in that five-year planning cycle and come to a conclusion on what to do. So I say, 'stay tuned.'"

James Kowis, LCRA's manager of water supply planning, said good planning depends on making sure all interests are represented.

In addition to voting membership, LCRA acts as the group's political subdivision eligible to apply for and manage the state grants necessary to accomplish the planning process.

"A lot of people are starting to ask, 'are we going to have enough water?'" Kowis said.

"They need to get involved. That's the purpose and role of regional planning, to look at demands in a realistic fashion and put in place plans to address them."

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