

Desalination is on the horizon

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Desalinated water will almost certainly be part of the San Antonio region's water supply in the future.

No other additional source has as much long-term potential, whether the water comes from the Gulf of Mexico or nearby aquifers.

The process, of course, has its share of difficulties.

That fact was demonstrated by last week's flare-up in Atascosa County, where foes of using that county's brackish groundwater convinced Pleasanton's chamber of commerce to decline a \$10,000 contribution from the San Antonio Water System for the annual Cowboy Homecoming.

Despite the fact that it will take an expensive project such as the one being planned by SAWS to bring value to brackish water, some vocal Atascosa County residents don't want their water pumped for use by San Antonio.

SAWS leaders intend to move forward on the project regardless.

Interim SAWS CEO Robert Puente said water agreements require a willing buyer and willing seller. "It's up to them," he added.

If Atascosa is unwilling, Puente noted, "We just have to look at other avenues."

He added, "We're going to continue our plans for a desalination plant."

The former lawmaker, who headed the House Natural Resources Committee, pointed out, "Overall, desalination is very important for the state's future and particularly SAWS' future ability to provide for this region."

He emphasized that the state is "very, very interested in communities pushing desalination projects."

SAWS board Chairman Alex Briseño said that in addition to the project now being planned in southern Bexar County and hopefully Wilson County, a larger regional approach that includes partners such as Corpus Christi and Laredo would be desirable.

A regional approach could be crucial for South Texas. As Briseño noted, mutual interests such as air quality, education, health care, transportation, economic development and water don't stop at county lines.

For now, Puente is leading a SAWS updated evaluation of the desalination plan along with all of its water supply efforts.

"By the end of the fall, we'll have a good idea where we're going on all of these water projects," Puente said.

The last cost estimate on the desalination project came in at \$1,375 per acre-foot, but since then the SAWS board opted not to buy additional land for the desalination plant but to use property it already owns.

If Atascosa water is not involved, the projected annual production drops from 28,000 acre-feet to 22,000 acre-feet. That could drive up costs, but other savings may be found.

SAWS already owns a field in Bexar County that can be used to pump brackish water from the Wilcox Aquifer. The huge aquifer extends from the U.S border with Mexico all the way to the Midwest, said Greg Flores, SAWS director of communications and customer service.

Flores added that 200 feet of shale and sand are between the brackish Wilcox and the freshwater in the Carrizo Aquifer above the Wilcox.

Originally, SAWS proposed a project that would produce 10,000 acre-feet.

Clearly, the project is viable even if Atascosa opts out.

South Texas has an abundance of brackish water.

The utility's desalination project is a first step for the region. The state's continued economic development hinges on an adequate water supply.

Flores noted that surface water rights have been gobbled up, and water districts around the state are preparing limits on freshwater pumping.

Brackish water is an untapped resource. Texas has no choice. Desalination will be a crucial part of water plans in the coming decades.

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