

New look at future: up to 25% thirstier (Region K)

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Data from LCRA show water demand beyond previous predictions.

By **Asher Price**

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Friday, December 19, 2008

Water demands in the Colorado River basin in coming decades could be as much as 25 percent more than previously estimated, according to new figures adopted by the Lower Colorado River Authority.

The LCRA numbers, which look more than 90 years into the future, raise questions about how the river authority will meet the needs of a river basin increasingly demanding water to bathe, water lawns, wash cars, fill swimming pools, cool power plants, grow rice, feed fish and other wildlife, and, of course, drink.

Early next year, the river authority's staff is scheduled to report on the water supplies required to meet those demands, according to Emla Chanslor, a spokeswoman for the LCRA.

The LCRA has long said it can handle demand. "We have ample supplies for decades into the future," said James Kowis, manager of water supply planning for the river authority.

The City of Austin, for its part, has locked in water through the year 2100 through a combination of its own water rights and contracts with the LCRA.

The new water demand numbers, which look further into the future than any previous study, show how population growth has outstripped even relatively recent calculations in the current state water plan and could give a more accurate sense of the pressure on Central Texas water supplies in coming decades.

The figures were ordered by the river authority's board as it prepares for a decision about whether to partner with San Antonio on a massive, multibillion-dollar water project that could send water from the Colorado to that city for 80 years; in return, the Colorado River basin would get money to pay for far-reaching storage projects and conservation programs.

Staff at the river authority looked at development permits, septic tank applications, state demographer's figures and birth and death rates, among other statistics, to arrive at the new numbers. In some periods, the LCRA and state figures vary widely: In 2040 for example, the LCRA predicts it will be called upon to supply 160.9 billion gallons of water. The state water plan predicts 128.8 billion gallons.

Water demand in the basin's most populated areas will increase rapidly, according to LCRA's predictions. In Travis County, the river authority predicts that it will have to supply 22 billion gallons of water in 2010; by 2050, it will need to supply the county with 71.5 billion gallons; and by 2100, 144.5 billion gallons a year.

The numbers show the migration of factories and people into the lower Colorado River basin, which stretches from north of the Highland Lakes to Matagorda Bay. Already, the LCRA is committed to water contracts providing as much as 165 billion gallons a year, even in times of drought. Its two main reservoirs, Lake Travis and Lake Buchanan, can supply up to 145 billion gallons in times of drought.

Less than one-third (46 billion gallons) of the lakes' yield has been used in any year, and it will be decades before the rest is called upon. By then, there will be other ways to slake the area's thirst, Kowis said: conservation measures, desalination plants, reservoirs and a reallocation of agricultural water to urban areas.

"We're looking out into the future to get a better idea, so that if we see that in, say, 2080, we will not have the existing supplies to meet demand, we'll have the lead time so that in the 2050 time frame, we can get our permits and do the things so we're ready to have water available in 2080."

Some water watchers predict more emphasis on conservation measures, like planting drought-tolerant grasses, watering yards less often and installing low-flush toilets.

The new water projection "points an obvious finger to water conservation" said Jennifer Walker, water resources specialist with the Lone Star chapter of the Sierra Club.

John Burke, chairman of the Lower Colorado Regional Water Planning Group, a panel of farmers, industrial users, water suppliers, conservationists and others who put together water demand figures for the 2007 state water plan, said the numbers are eye-opening.

"At some point, water suppliers are going to be saying all these subdivision can't just come in here forever and say, 'Hook me up. I'm going to do another thousand lots,'" said Burke, who manages the Aqua Water Supply Corp. operations in Bastrop and eastern Travis counties.

asherprice@statesman.com; 445-3643

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