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COMMENTARY

Beal: Don't let the state's water options dry up

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More than a decade ago, Texas kicked off an ambitious and comprehensive program to guarantee that the state would have the water supplies it needed through 2050. Much good work has been done under the framework established by 1997's Senate Bill 1, but Texas still faces alarming trends when it comes to its water needs. More action - and more funding - will be needed to keep Texas on a path that heads away from the water crises seen in other states.

Right now, for each person in Texas, we have about the same capacity in the state's reservoirs as we did in the early 1950s, right before the worst drought ever to hit the state. Back then, as the scale of the water crisis became evident, Texans embarked on a conservation program and building boom that quickly tripled the state's effective water supply. That level of effort today would be much, much more difficult and expensive; the permitting process alone could take 15 to 20 years.

Texas could be lucky when it comes to the weather in coming years, though many areas are seeing significant drought. But it's a near certainty that, whatever the chance of rain, the number of Texans will grow faster than the capacity to supply the water they need.

The planning process under SB 1, which instituted a regional approach and enables cooperation between local water suppliers, has outlined a combination of conservation efforts, pipelines, new reservoirs and underground supplies. We have a good idea of how much water we need and what we can do to supply it, though there are some areas, such as the future water supplies required to generate electric power, where more analysis is needed.

What we don't know is how implementing the plans will affect the state's environment, specifically the inflows into the rivers, bays and estuaries. The impact has human and economic costs for industries such as agriculture, fishing, tourism and others that depend upon the state's natural resources, and understanding these impacts is required under state and federal law. The SB 1 framework does not establish sound, well-funded scientific approaches to executing this key component of water planning.

Consider the proposed project to transfer water from the Lower Colorado River Authority supplies to the San Antonio Water System. The project, authorized by special legislation after SB 1, required an environmental analysis that has taken five years and is expected to cost \$50 million. Texans should expect to factor in that kind of effort and expense for many, perhaps most, of the state's future water projects.

Much of the financing capacity to pay for the projects is accessible through water utilities, river authorities and special taxing districts. But as the population grows, and as engineering and environmental analyses and costs expand, we must look at additional revenue streams.

Ideas for generating revenue, ranging from water rights fees to sales taxes on bottled water, have been thoroughly reviewed by the Texas Water Development Board, which estimates such measures could raise from \$50 million to \$175 million per year. This would allow us to understand which options are viable and worth pursuing, so we can move forward on the projects that will help us avoid crises. The Legislature needs to devote attention in the upcoming session to consider and choose the best options to keep Texas taps from running dry.

Beal is former general manager of the Lower Colorado River Authority and is a senior consultant for PBS&J.

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