

# Insufficient water supplies could cost Texas billions, state report says

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LUBBOCK – Reliable sources of clean water are the key to a successful economic future for Texas and without them the state and businesses could suffer billions in losses.

That was the dire message in a recent report from the office of state comptroller Susan Combs, a longtime West Texas rancher familiar with the agricultural difficulties that come from too little water.

"The water wolf is lurking right outside the door," Combs told The Associated Press. "This could actually cost the state a whole lot of money."

In the report, "Liquid Assets: The State of Texas' Water Resources," Combs' office projected that insufficient water supplies could cost Texans about \$9 billion next year and more than \$98 billion by 2060.

The state also stands to lose tax revenues – about \$466 million next year and more than \$5 billion by 2060 – if its water needs are not met, according to the report.

Among the reasons cited were Texas' rapidly growing population and ongoing drought across much of the state.

Texas' population is expected to double to over 46 million by 2060, boosting the water demand by about 27 percent, the report states. More than 95 percent of the state is in some stage of drought, according to the most recent U.S. Drought Monitor's map.

Because Texas does not have enough sources of water to meet its future needs, the report said new management and strategies will need to be crafted.

The Texas Water Development Board, which oversees the state's water resources, estimates that groundwater accounts for about 60 percent of all available fresh water. Surface water amounts to about 40 percent.

Both sources are decreasing: groundwater is being pumped from the state's numerous aquifers faster than they can be recharged and sediment accumulations is robbing reservoirs of surface water capacity.

Other threats to Texas' water supplies also loom, the report found. For example, a drought would leave about 85 percent of the state's population 2060 without enough water.

The report suggests more tax dollars may be needed going forward to help plan for the state's water needs.

Amy Hardberger, an attorney with The Environmental Defense Fund in Texas, disagreed with parts of the report, saying it relied on the "status quo" for its projections.

"The underlying assumptions are wrong and not what they should be," she said. The report "assumes for the most part that we're going to be using water in the same way we're using it now, and I think that's a mistake. That does not really need to be our future. We don't sort of march forth and not learn from our past."

Combs said she knows future water usage will change, but that the report "simply pointed out what might happen."

She said the state should focus first on conservation, including preventing "a sizable number" of gallons now being lost due to leaky municipal water delivery systems.

"A lot of this is invisible," Combs said. "That's not sexy or dynamic or exciting but it's really water. It's in the state's interest ... to assist cities to ensure water is making it from pipe to pipe."

A committee of Texas House and Senate members has been meeting since the 2007 to review options for planning for the state's future water needs, the report states. Among the possibilities are a sales tax on water and sewer services provided by public water supply systems; a water conservation and development fee on customers' utility bills and increasing the water rights fee currently paid by water rights holders.

Other options include a fee on each water connection in the state and a sales tax on bottled water.

The money would help provide links between water development projects and end users, the report said. About \$2.4 billion in state funding will be needed to support \$30.7 billion in local projects identified in the current water plan.

The comptroller's report also said all communities must make an effort to conserve existing water supplies. It suggested stronger oversight and accountability to make sure state money goes only to water projects that are truly needed and meet certain criteria, including adequacy, equity, affordability, simplicity and conservation.

Hardberger, the environmental lawyer, said Texas' water woes need to be looked at systemically and using a multidimensional approach.

"We can no longer continue to look at things in separate categories," she said. "The focus should be on what can we do differently, better, smarter. It will take some creative solutions and people working together."

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