

## **Ranchers want delay on Guadalupe water project**

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Representatives of Victoria's O'Connor ranching dynasty said Thursday they want to call a "time out" on the development of the Lower Guadalupe River Diversions until they can get answers to what they say are bothersome questions about the massive water project. "Our challenge is to stop it for several years to make sure it is studied like no other project in history," said Mark Rose, an Austin water consultant and former director of the Lower Colorado River Authority.

The \$600-plus-million project is scheduled to be on line in another 10 years, but Rose said he'd prefer to see a "50- to 100-year horizon" for its development.

The Lower Guadalupe River Diversions would be built by the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority and two San Antonio water suppliers: the San Antonio River Authority and the San Antonio Water System.

It would take water from beneath the ground somewhere in the vicinity of Refugio, Victoria, Goliad and Calhoun counties, mix it with Guadalupe River water drawn from near Tivoli, and pump it by the billions of gallons to San Antonio via a 78-inch-diameter pipeline through Goliad, DeWitt, Karnes and Wilson counties.

Rose and Jim Blackburn, a Houston environmental attorney who has also been retained by O'Connor Brothers Ranches to assess the proposed project, outlined their concerns during a focus group meeting at One O'Connor Plaza arranged by the O'Connor Brothers. About 60, many by invitation, attended the meeting, including elected officials, ranchers, water district board members, representatives of the agencies developing the Diversions project, members of an already-established project opposition group, and other interested citizens.

Concerns expressed included the depletion of the area's groundwater aquifers and damage caused by too little river water getting to the bays and estuaries of the Guadalupe Delta, home to the endangered whooping crane.

Concerns were also voiced about the proposed use of higher amounts of groundwater during drought years when the river runs low; the validity of the computer models that will be employed to predict the project's impact on the ecology of the bays and estuaries; the failure by project developers to compute in their cost estimates the loss of productivity to the bays, which Blackburn estimated at \$1 billion per year; whether San Antonio would relinquish the water to the Victoria region once the project's announced 50-year life comes to an end; and whether developers could really cut off the water supply to San Antonio during droughts without a court battle.

"If you're not sure what the impacts will be, the prudent thing is to be careful and not rush forward," said Blackburn.

Rose said great damage could result from the project. "A project of this magnitude has never been undertaken in the state of Texas," said Rose, who equated the impact of the project to that of the state's biggest dams when they were first built.

"The project's infrastructure system would forever change the characteristics of the river," he said. "Our purpose is to say 'time out.' There are very serious issues and much more study will have to be done before accepting this. Our goal is to ask more questions, expect more answers and hope more study takes place."

Rose also questioned the need for the multiple water-pipeline projects now on the books to supply San Antonio, including one plan to pump Colorado River water from the Bay City area and another to pipe groundwater from the Bastrop area.

He also predicted that those in the Victoria area who try to sell their groundwater to the Diversions' developers will find groundwater "a less significant resource for development" than they might now believe.

One man in the audience asked what can be done to delay the project. Blackburn said the developers must apply for state permits to build the project. "There are ways to protest permits and it is our intention to do that if we need to," he said. Blackburn also suggested that a "group emerge" to take the concerns to the boards of the agencies developing the project. "That's the first place to go."

Bill Jones, the former Victoria TV reporter who was the moderator for the event, described the meeting as a "first step to a meaningful dialogue that gives another view of this critical issue."

Those in attendance seemed largely sympathetic to the concerns raised. "I think by the participation tonight and the interest that was shown, it's clear that many people share the same concerns that the O'Connor family has. In that regard, this meeting was a tremendous success and we look forward to having many more in the future." Jones said the plan now is to "aggressively gather information and to process this information into whatever action is necessary to preserve the water in this region."

For more information on the O'Connor Brothers' effort, call Jones at 576-4000. Greg Bowen is a reporter for The Victoria Advocate. Contact him at 361-580-6519, or by e-mail at [gbowen@vicad.com](mailto:gbowen@vicad.com).