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Commentary

Walker: Drought will force some tough choices

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After the 1930s and the construction of the massive Highland Lakes, our water supply seemed more or less infinite. Today, with our regional population topping 1.6 million, it is becoming very clear that the reservoirs do indeed have a bottom.

The last two summers have been some of the hottest and driest ever. Lakes Travis and Buchanan were full in the fall of 2007; today they are at less than 50 percent of capacity. And because both rainfall and water flowing into the lakes are at a record low, this problem is likely to get worse before it gets better.

This drought needs to serve as a wake-up call. It is time for a paradigm shift in the way we use and think about water.

In the coming decades, Central Texans are going to make hard choices about the future of our water resources. Austin residents are facing the first of these questions as the city debates whether to build another water treatment plant, at a cost of a half-billion dollars, or to attempt to postpone the plant with an aggressive conservation program. The potential for postponing the water treatment plant is just one of many reasons the city should concentrate on water conservation.

It may come as a surprise that even though Central Texas has been in an "exceptional" drought — the worst category — since last summer, the Lower Colorado River Authority did not ask its customers for mandatory drought management measures until this week, when the lakes fell to a combined storage of 900,000 acre-feet.

Summer is nearly over, and a huge opportunity for water savings has been lost. In most Texas cities, water use dramatically increases during the summer because of lawn watering. The Texas Water Development Board estimates that about half of this water is wasted to over-watering or runoff. Watering restrictions reduce this waste.

It would be logical for water providers in Central Texas to implement drought management measures whenever we are in a significant drought instead of waiting for artificial trigger points to be hit. A wait-and-see approach might have been enough at one time, but Central Texas' growth rate combined with climate change means we need to be more cautious.

Unfortunately, scientists are telling us that summers like this one could become more common. A 2007 Columbia University study found that "there is a broad consensus amongst climate models that the levels of aridity of the recent multiyear drought, or the Dust Bowl and 1950s droughts, will, within the coming years to decades, become the new climatology of the American Southwest." Yikes.

Recently, the LCRA gave a preview of the options for expanding the region's water supply beyond the Highland Lakes. It is not a pretty picture. All the options except conservation were very expensive and had significant environmental downsides. We will be better off using water wisely year in and year out and doubling down on our conservation efforts during droughts.

Conservation does work. Over the past 25 years, Los Angeles has grown by about 1 million people without increasing the amount of water it uses. In San Antonio, total water use fell between 1993 and 2004 even though the city's service area grew by more than 200,000 people. And total water use in Austin has remained fairly steady over the past decade despite a population increase of around 200,000.

Working together, we can change the way we use water without sacrificing our quality of life. This is not just about avoiding the controversial water treatment plant; it is about making sure that we have the water we need so that Central Texas can remain a vibrant place to live and do business.

Walker is water resources specialist of the Sierra Club, Lone Star Chapter.

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