

Victoria Advocate

Seeking a consensus plan for water

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In 1997, the state of Texas instituted a water planning process intended to be a "from the bottom up" rather than a "from the state down" type of process.

To do this, Texas was divided up into 16 Regional Water Planning Groups around common river basins, groundwater resources and population groups. This is a significant undertaking, done at five-year intervals, as our state is expected to double in population over the next 50 years.

Our region is the South Central Texas Water Planning Region, or as it is more commonly known, Region L.

It encompasses all or parts of 21 counties, portions of nine river and coastal basins, the Guadalupe Estuary, and San Antonio Bay.

Region L has the somewhat dubious distinction of having been the only region in the state that was unable to complete its 2006 plan by the required deadline.

In 2007, HB3776 was passed with provision for the plan to be accepted by the state if the Lower Guadalupe Water Supply Project was included in the plan with fairly specific protections for our lower basin and environmental concerns.

These included a reservation of 100,000 acre feet of water for the Lower Basin.

Negotiations began within the planning group, and finally, earlier this year, the plan was approved for submission to the state.

To help focus some of the issues expected to be faced in the upcoming planning process, Region L Chairman Con Mims, general manager of the Nueces River Authority, put together a work group for the Lower Guadalupe River Basin and another for the Mid Guadalupe River Basin.

Some of the major issues looked at by the groups were the amount of water proposed to be made available by prospective projects and the amount of water needed by population areas.

A concern of the regional planning group has been the concept of "double dipping," or having significantly more water available in water supply projects than there is need.

Another example is some population areas having significantly more water dedicated to each area by projects than they will likely need.

I was asked to serve on the committee for the Lower Basin, and, as always, it was certainly an interesting process.

The group reviewed projects and needs and made certain recommendations for the Region L stakeholder group to consider.

Several new projects were proposed by the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority in addition to the existing Lower Guadalupe River Water Supply Project.

These projects included application for a new junior priority water right in Calhoun County for up to 189,484 acre-feet, off-channel storage of up to 200,000 acre feet in the Lower Basin at a site or sites yet to be determined and a desalination project.

The recommendation of the group was to move the LGWSP from "recommended" status to "alternative" status.

Recommended status projects can be considered by the Texas Water Development Board for funding and by the TCEQ for the processing of permit applications for such things as surface water rights. These projects have gone through the full technical review process of the regional planning groups and are considered viable projects.

Alternate projects may have been fully vetted by the technical review projects but are not considered priority projects by the planning group. These projects would not be given consideration in funding or permitting by the state agencies. These projects can be reconsidered as recommended projects, but only by a vote of the regional planning group.

The LGSWP is a project that has met with some controversy in our region.

The other projects were recommended to the Region L Group to stay in "recommended" status pending further review by the stakeholder group.

To facilitate this, the GBRA agreed to state in the project description that the off-channel storage project would include no provision for eminent domain to obtain land for the project, and the new water right would meet all of the criteria for the Environmental Flows process that is about to begin for our basin.

It should also be considered that this would be the most junior right on the river, and all water rights, not just 100,000 acre feet, must be fully satisfied before this right can be pumped.

These are, in fact, recommendations and are subject to the decision of the actual stakeholders in the process, including several from our area.

The projects are still subject to technical review by the engineering and planning consultants for consideration by the stakeholders as well as significant opportunities for public review and comment.

I encourage you as citizens and public and private entities to participate in this process.

We will not all agree on the outcome; this is, after all, water, but we can come closer to a consensus plan through active participation.

Jerry James is a member of the Lower Guadalupe River Basin committee, the city of Victoria's director of environmental services and a resident of Victoria.

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