

Water woes: Looming crisis should spur conservation first

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Texans have an insatiable thirst for water, especially in our urban areas. Members of the state Senate Committee on Natural Resources met Monday to hear water experts predict that with the state's population expected to double in the next 50 years, we face the very real prospect of running out of water.

Among metro areas, Dallas residents are among the thirstiest in Texas, using an average of 244 gallons daily. San Antonio residents, in contrast, use 172 gallons daily, according to the state comptroller's office. Yet it is Dallas that is pushing hardest for construction of two new reservoirs in East Texas that would flood valuable hardwood forests and destroy a portion the Sulphur and Neches rivers. Both projects have been stymied thus far by opposition from landowners and environmentalists.

There is something wrong with flooding hardwood forests, destroying wildlife habitat and seizing land so Dallas residents can continue to have lush green lawns. One estimate from the city of Dallas is more than half of its summer water usage goes for outdoor watering: lawns, landscaping, golf courses, etc. The city has a water conservation ordinance and is attempting to restrict outdoor water use, but its residents still have the dubious distinction of using more water per capita compared to residents of any other large city in Texas.

The recent drought, which thankfully has ended for most of Texas with the abundant rains of the fall, only emphasizes the need for strict conservation measures everywhere, but especially in areas that receive far less rainfall than we get here in East Texas. Many cities have taken action. That's one reason San Antonio, for example, has managed to drop per-capita water consumption by nearly one-third in the past decade or so.

But more action is needed, such as requiring water-miser fixtures in new homes and office buildings, pushing even harder for xeriscape landscaping in residential and commercial areas.

In addition, the efficacy of building desalination plants along the Gulf Coast should be examined. Several hundred such plants provide clean drinking water to Arab nations, and there are a limited number already operating in the United States. Recent scientific breakthroughs in filtering techniques should make such plants even more viable.

All these measures should be considered well before legislators decide to flood valuable land and ruin beautiful rivers to build new reservoirs — just to keep lawns green in Dallas and other major cities. The Legislature will take up this issue beginning in 2011. Now is the time to encourage legislators to promote conservation first, reservoirs last.

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