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Troubled Waters: Regional cooperation drying out

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Imagine life without water. People use water to brush their teeth, clean their clothes, dishes, cars, to entertain children and of course for sustenance and refreshment. It is replenishing.

Austin bartender Gary Sanchez works at Kenichi restaurant. He said the recent drought has given him cause to pay more attention to his restaurant's water use.

"You'd be surprised," he said. "The people you do serve water without asking—maybe a sip out of it, tops—and then you're dumping basically a full glass of water as they go to the table or leave to another establishment."

The bottom line, Texans use a lot of water. In the state of Texas, 16.5 million acre-feet of water is used ever year. An acre-foot of water would cover a football field one-foot deep.

The State of Texas has a lot of water. If all the rivers in Texas were stretched end-to-end, they would circle the equator two and a half times.

Managing the state's water is a big job. More than a decade ago, the State of Texas reevaluated how it wanted the job done.

"Texas is really a state of many states," [Texas A&M University Water Program](#) Chair and professor Ronald Kaiser said.

Recognizing that, the Texas Legislature created a ground-up approach to water management in 1997 by dividing the state into 16 regions.

"The idea was to recognize the diversity of the water needs throughout the state," Kaiser said. "Some areas have plenty of water, and in the next 50 years, they'll never use all the water that they have. Other areas of the state that are growing are in more desert-like environments where there's not much rainfall."

Some hoped the new approach to planning would have a Robin Hood effect, helping move the resource from water-rich areas to the water-poor areas.

"Some transfers of water, as long as we have urban areas, will have to happen," [Texas Water Development Board](#) Water Resources Planning & Information Director Dan Hardin said.

But, the search for water is being met with resistance for some regions.

"Their plans often are starting to look like planning by keeping the water within their boundaries, almost. Very parochial, in a sense, and really contrary to what we thought regional planning should be," [San Antonio Water System](#) CEO Robert Puente said.



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Water Timeline

To view a [history of major events](#) for water development in Texas, and a general history of the [Texas Water Development Board](#), click the links.



In 1997 the Texas Legislature divided the state into 16 regions.

Now, at center stage is a battle over water between two of the state's fastest-growing regions.

The San Antonio Water System filed suit against the [Lower Colorado River Authority](#) for breach of contract after the LCRA said it doesn't have enough water to protect its own basin and share water with San Antonio.

"You don't want to gamble with water supply. You don't want to under-project what real demands may be," LCRA General Manager Tom Mason said.

Once considered a model for water sharing, the LCRA-SAWS agreement is now part of a politicized debate over water sharing.

"SAWS was willing to pay 100 percent of this project, and it was going to create more water for the basin, separate from the amount of water San Antonio was going to get. So if they're saying they need more water, well this project was going to bring more water to them and be paid for by SAWS," Puente said.

The water wars in Texas aren't limited to this one conflict. It affects urban cities, rural farmland and even the states' coastal areas. In the end, the treaty could come down to simply reducing use.

"Another option is to be more frugal with our use of water," Kaiser said. "That frugality goes under the name of water conservation."

So as Texans continue to quench their thirst, whether in our cities and towns or in our fields and factories, one thing is for sure, there isn't enough water to calm the concerns of many Texas communities.



The search for water is being met with resistance for some regions.



The LCRA-SAWS agreement has become a politicized debate.

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