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Troubled Waters: Texas rice farmer takes on water wars

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Few crops take more water to grow than rice, and Robby Cook knows that first hand.

"I'm a fifth generation farmer," Cook said.

He said rice farming is in his blood, and his way of life depends on the Colorado River.

"For several generations, we had made our livelihood off of the Colorado River water. Many families around here have been in existence farming rice for 100 years," Cook said.

But farming hasn't always been his only job; he also served as a state representative from 1997 to 2007.

In 2001, Cook co-sponsored legislation to move water from the Colorado River, the river that quenches the thirst of his rice crops, to San Antonio. At the time, he looked at it as a way to protect his livelihood.

"Water will have to move in the state," Cook said.

Knowing that, he helped develop a plan that, if successful, would be a win-win situation for all parties involved.

"Instead of having water wars in Texas, it is less expensive to work together," Cook said.

[San Antonio Water System](#) CEO and former state representative Robert Puente is a man of the city, and in looking out for his city's interests, he sponsored the water-moving legislation with Cook.

Puente said it marked a milestone in the growing establishment of water as a major commodity.

"It was viewed as historic, as true regional planning," Puente said. "It was really seen as a poster child for cooperation for regional planning, a sign of cooperation where future problems could be solved."

Unfortunately, not everything worked out as planned.

"There's an old saying, 'Whisky is for drinking, and water is for fighting over,'" [Lower Colorado River Authority](#) General Manager, Tom Mason, said.

As such, what once was a poster child for mutualism in the allocation of water resources, has become a brutal legal battle.

"We couldn't protect our basin and give San Antonio water at the same time," Mason said.



Rice farmers depend on the Colorado River for their livelihood.

Troubled Water Series

Part 1: [Water Wars: Regional cooperation drying out](#)



Legislation was enacted in 2001 to move water from one region to another.

LCRA said there is simply not enough water to go around.

"The latest population projections and demand for the future in terms of demand for water in our basin were much greater than we had thought a number of years ago," Mason said.

SAWS said the way LCRA arrived at that decision was not in good faith.

"They simply have changed the rules. They have made up a new set of rules for themselves," SAWS attorney Jim George said.

SAWS further accuses the LCRA board of changing water availability and usage projections to justify nixing its agreement. The agency said it all comes down to politics.

"What went wrong, I think, is a tremendous changeover; a 100 percent change over on the LCRA board. No one that was there in 2000, 2001, 2002 is there today. So I think a lot of pressure in the lower basin changed this project. It changed the parameters of this project, and we feel that the LCRA board made certain decisions that were contrary to the contract," Puente said.

SAWS's attorney said the repercussions of this broken agreement could change how our state makes future water plans.

"LCRA's action is a blow to everybody in Texas, because in the end, Texas, over the next century, has to have a statewide water plan, so that water can be moved to the places it's needed from the places that have more than they need," George said.

He said he believed it will make other regions think twice about entering water sharing agreements.


"What LCRA's done, by their action, has put a dagger in the heart of anybody who will make an agreement with anyone else," George said.

As Cook looked back on what was once a historic piece of legislation for the State of Texas, he noted how vital a natural resource water has become.

"This is really a snapshot of the water wars and how contentious water can be," Cook said.

Cook said his first priority is still the Colorado River basin, and if there's simply not enough water to go around, he doesn't consider this project a failure.

"It wasn't designed just to make sure water moved from point A to point B in the path of least resistance, whether it be politically or financially, or someone from the cities or an industry that had more money than a rice farmer did," Cook said.


Water History in Texas

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.



The agreement would move water from the Colorado River to San Antonio.



The San Antonio Water System is filing suit against the LCRA for water.

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