



Troubled Waters: Bad news travels near and far

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Nearly 600 billion gallons of water flow through the Colorado River in a typical year. How that water is used, from recreation to livelihood, varies by region.

At the [Austin Yacht Club](#), Christopher Dwight serves as a harbor commander, a volunteer position that requires a big commitment during the summer months.

"Trying to keep the boats safe and the docks safe and, as much as possible, the organization working," Dwight said.

As water levels at Lake Travis dropped, Dwight spent most weekends moving docks. The Austin Yacht Club has spent about \$23,000 so far this year just to keep the docks in the water. The club's budget for the year was only \$10,000.

Dwight said he's frustrated knowing that much of the water leaving Lake Travis, and leaving the docks out to dry, was going downstream to farmers.

In fact, the Lower Colorado River Authority said nearly 70 percent of the water in the Colorado River is used for agriculture.

"If you just look at the population, we're talking 1.5 billion gallons a day going downstream to support a community the size of, what, maybe 10,000 people, 20,000 people? Versus the 220 million supporting a community of over half a million," Dwight said. "Those ratios are amazing when you think of the number of people and the number of gallons."

Downstream, Ronald Gertson is one of those farmers. His family has been farming rice in Wharton County for generations.

While Dwight was watching his summer pastime slip away, Gertson was trying to hold on to his way of life.

"The water battles in Texas tend to be urban against rural," Gertson said.

As populations have soared in the cities upstream from Gertson's farm, the demand for municipal water has also increased, leaving less available for irrigation.



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The Lower Colorado River Authority said it is still evaluating whether there will be enough water in the Highland Lakes next year to serve both its cities and rural farmers. The agency has never had to make a decision based on that kind of evaluation.

"In the history of the irrigation district along the Colorado River, we've never gotten to a point where we've not had the water available," Gertson said.

That battle over the water doesn't end in the cities or on the farm. The vitality of the Colorado River greatly affects wildlife and industries dependent on certain types of wildlife.

The Texas Coast shrimping business needs fresh water from the Colorado River to thrive.

"Salinity is very important to the estuaries where the shrimp actually spawn," W.W. Dock Shrimp owner Craig Wallis said. "You can have too much salt water. We need some outflow for these small shrimp to actually reproduce, which is an annual crop."

Shrimping in the Texas coast is a big industry.

"The good Lord put them there for us annually to catch, and if we stop the outflow, stop the fresh water inflow to our bays and our estuaries, we will not have any shrimp. It will kill them," Wallis said.

That doesn't mean Wallis, who depends on the waters of the Colorado River to make his living, doesn't understand competing demands.

Whether sailing on the blue waters of Lake Travis, quenching the thirsts of growing cities or irrigating crops that keep Texas farming alive, the question remains, can 600 billion gallons of water meet the needs of Texans upstream and down?

"We're all going to have to meet ourselves somewhere in a happy medium, so everyone can survive this," Wallis said.

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Shrimping in the Texas coast is a big industry.

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