



Brackish water explored for alternate supply

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Before an overflow crowd of more than 100, the Lone Star Groundwater Conservation District approved the hiring of a consultant to determine how – and if – underground brackish water could be used to meet a mandate reduction in groundwater use in the county.

Several large water providers petitioned the district to allow them to investigate brackish water to address a 30 percent reduction in the use of groundwater by 2016.

The consultant would help to determine if the underground brackish water is included in or impacts the county's underground water supply and to develop protocols on how it could be used to fulfill the mandate.

"You need guidance to make a decision on what's available," said Lone Star's attorney Brian Sledge.

The district also tabled a request to postpone its deadlines to meet the groundwater reduction. Several large water providers asked the district for more time to explore alternative or to negotiate a contract with the San Jacinto River Authority, which is offering the only group plan to achieve a 30 percent reduction countywide.

"We filed a resolution to put the brakes on this thing for the time being," said Ron Young, an attorney for Municipal Utility District 18. "We just need more time."

Montgomery County relies solely on groundwater for its water supply, and it is using more annually than can be replenished through runoff and rainfall. To manage the underground aquifer, the district set a deadline of 2016 for large water providers – those permitted to take more than 10 million a year – to find an alternative supply.

The San Jacinto River Authority is offering a group contract to use Lake Conroe to provide surface water to the most heavily populated corridors in The Woodlands and Conroe, while allowing outlying areas to remain entirely on groundwater.

But several providers are unhappy with the option because there is no governmental oversight of the plan and it does not include accountability for the San Jacinto River Authority, said Mayor Webb Melder of Conroe.

“We and many others feel that the current deadline limits the water supply options for Montgomery County,” Melder said.

Some water providers are setting their sights on a new water source found deep underground. While the three aquifers that provide groundwater to Montgomery County range from about 400 feet to about 3,700 feet under the surface, brackish water can be found 4,000 to 12,000 feet underground.

Several municipal utility districts sought guidance from Lone Star before investing \$500,000 to \$1 million on a test well to access the brackish water. To use the water, the MUDs would have to build a reverse osmosis plant to remove salt from the water.

The Lone Star protocols should take two to three weeks to develop, said Kathy Turner Jones, general manager of the district.

At the same time, several water providers wanted to adjust the deadline to comply with the mandated reduction plan. Because the district has to provide 20 days notice for any rule changes, that issue will be addressed at the March meeting.

State Sen. Tommy Williams, R-The Woodlands, urged the district to stick to its deadlines.

“The plan the river authority put forward is not perfect, but no real negotiations have taken place,” said Williams, who tried unsuccessfully in the last two legislative sessions to pass a countywide solution to the issue. “If you don’t stick with your regulatory framework, you have no hope to reach a negotiated agreement. Your deadlines is what is forcing participants to the table.”

Deadlines for Water Reduction

The Lone Star Groundwater Conservation District, which regulates the use of groundwater in Montgomery County, set a timetable to achieve a 30 percent reduction in the use of groundwater by 2016. Following are key dates in the process.

June 1, 2010. Large water providers – those permitted for more than 10 million gallons annually – must file a declaration of intent on if they will participate in a group plan or individual effort

Jan 1, 2011 – Each large groundwater provider must file a plan on how it will achieve the 30 percent reduction.

Jan. 1, 2016. The water providers must reduce use of groundwater by 30 percent or faces fines.

Source: Lone Star Groundwater Conservation District

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