

An editorial from the Brazosports Facts

Drinking water remains a concern for area

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The Facts

Published January 31, 2010

Brazoria County residents live only a few minutes away from water.

With the beach to the south and rivers, creeks and bayous winding through the county, it would be easy to assume an ample water supply just doesn't seem to be a problem.

But in 2009, area officials learned the area known for its wetland habitats someday could be without an adequate source of clean drinking water.

"While it appears we have plenty of water, sometimes more than we want, we have all seen what can happen with a lack of rainwater," said Precinct 4 Commissioner Mary Ruth Rhodenbaugh.

With memories still fresh of Dow Chemical Co.'s purchase of water from the Brazos River Authority and Brazos Water Authority's subsequent purchase from Dow during last year's drought, county commissioners met in a workshop Tuesday to discuss the future of water in Brazoria County.

The population of Brazoria County is growing faster than expected, meaning the need for water also is growing, said Kent Burkett, a representative of the Brazoria County Groundwater Conservation District.

GROUNDWATER

There are three logical places to get water: groundwater, surface water and ocean water.

Problems with groundwater began several years ago, leading to the creation of the Brazoria County Groundwater Conservation District.

Groundwater is a resource becoming less available to the county, Burkett said. In the northern end of the county, subsidence, or sinking land, has occurred where overpumping of water has taken place, he said. This has led to problems like structure damage and flooding, he said.

The groundwater conservation district plans the use of groundwater and imposes fees on those who export groundwater from Brazoria County to deter them from doing so, Burkett said. Groundwater is a limited resource and is unlikely to be a solution for the county's long-term needs, he said.

SURFACE WATER

Surface water is the next option and includes rivers. For Brazoria County, that specifically means the Brazos River.

Brazosport Water Authority treats 8 million to 12 million gallons of water every day, sending it to seven member cities, BWA Board President Steve Boykin said.

When the water authority began in the 1980s, treating surface water was the best solution and the best technology, but the recent drought proved the Brazos River might not have enough supply for the many counties who feed off it, he said.

The amount of water in the Brazos River does not depend as much on local rain, but rainfall further upstream, said Gena Leathers, a Dow representative. The Brazos River is controlled by the Brazos River Authority, and Brazoria County is the last place to draw from the river, she said.

Hundreds of cities, businesses and farms pull from the river as it makes its way to the Gulf of Mexico. As the river's flow decreases, saltwater works its way up the river. That makes miles of river unusable to Dow, which needs the water to operate its plants, she said.

As an industry that has senior rights to water in the Brazos River, Dow can purchase water, but the cost is high and the water is not guaranteed, Leathers said.

So though the Brazos River is working for area cities and industry right now, it would take only a short time with no rain in northern areas of Texas to create some serious water shortages in Brazoria County, Leathers said.

Industry also isn't the only county business that needs water.

Local rice farmers must draw water from the river to grow their crop. Rice farms contribute 85.7 million to the local economy every year and create 620 jobs, said Corrie Bowen, Brazoria County agriculture extension agent.

Without the ability to draw from the Brazos River, the crops cannot survive, he said.

Last week's meeting was about Brazoria County's future water needs, but the entire state of Texas is facing difficult decisions about its water, said David Meeseey, representative from the Texas Water Development Board.

POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Solutions brought up at the commissioners' workshop included a desalination plant, ordinances forcing water conservation and formation of a group dedicated to planning Brazoria County's water needs.

Buddy Baker, a member of the Brazosport Business Roundtable, spoke in favor of working toward a countywide desalination plant.

“I know it’s expensive, but I would rather have expensive water than no water,” Baker said.

He also suggested commissioners, industry and organizations dedicated to providing water work together to find a solution.

The Texas Water Development Board assists communities in implementing water plans, including state or federal financial assistance, Meesey said.

The Houston-Galveston Area Council already works to keep surface water clean and might be able to assist the county with securing funding, said Jeff Taebel, a council representative.

It’s important that everyone has a water conservation plan, said Brandt Mannchen, representative from the Houston-area Sierra Club chapter.

“Water conservation is the cheapest water you can ever obtain,” Mannchen said.

Suggestions for cities include water conservation rate structures that increase the price of water as usage rises as well as good metering for water, he said.

Cities also could require new or remodeled structures to have low-flow shower heads and toilets, he said.

Small changes in area homes could lead to thousands of gallons of water saved, Mannchen said.

“I don’t expect Washington or Austin to solve our problems for us,” Baker said. “I feel that the people in this area can solve our problems.”

Rhodenbaugh said she looks forward to establishing a task force to further look into the issue and create a plan to protect and conserve area water sources.

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