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Marvin Nichols Reservoir: Unusual alliances form in opposition to project

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It's not often that the timber industry and environmental groups join hands to fight the same battle. But when it comes to the construction of the proposed Marvin Nichols Reservoir, the two are one in aim-to stop the thing from being built.

At a recent jam-packed meeting of the Northeast Texas Regional Water Planning Group, opponents to the 1.7 billion dollar project filled the Mount Pleasant Agricultural Extension Center wearing stickers that said "Don't let Dallas 'hog' our water". A black funeral wreath bearing the name "Marvin Nichols" greeted them as they filed into the hall. Together, representatives from the Sierra Club, Ward Timber Company and other vested organizations joined with the voices of farmers, ranchers and concerned citizens to ask that alternatives be considered.

Oran Caudle, a private consultant out of Texarkana drew from a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' recent "Texas Water Allocation Assessment Report".

"The Corps report shows that there exists much more additional water for Dallas-Fort Worth from existing lakes than could ever be made available from Marvin Nichols," Caudle charged, and read from page 4-6 of the document, which stated that Lake Texoma could provide about 650,000 acre-feet per year of additional water supply through reallocation of storage.

According to a report prepared by the Texas Committee on Natural Resources (TCNR), Lake Texoma is the most viable alternative and a more economical option than the proposed reservoir.

"The practical way to use Texoma water would be to divert it when the lake is fullest (hence when Texoma's slightly-salty water is freshest) and pipe it to Lake Ray Roberts and/or other area lakes to keep them full," the report stated. It goes on to add that water from Texoma would "cost from one-tenth to one fifteenth as much to develop as water from Marvin Nichols."

Caudle also brought up desalination of the saline groundwater in the area as an option to be considered, and cited the new Tampa Bay desalination plant as a model to look toward. According to information from www.tampabaywater.org, the facility is projected to provide drinking water at an overall wholesale cost of \$2.08 per thousand gallons for the next thirty years. That cost, however, will be underwritten in part by the Southwest Florida Water Management District bringing the price down to an average of \$1.58 per

thousand gallons.

Bill Ward of Ward Timber Company voiced his belief that desalination is the answer.

"It is the only guarantee that in times of drought, you will have water," he opined. "If we suck the gulf dry, we're sure in trouble."

Walt Sears, Jr., General Manager of the Northeast Texas Munciple Water District assured that all alternatives would be considered.

"I would like to make the observation that in the first round of planning, the board looked at all of the possible alternatives, including every alternative that was mentioned at yesterdays meeting, plus more," he commented on the proceedings of the meeting. "I think it's fair to say that the board is committed to looking at all possible alternatives."

While alternatives to the controversial reservoir were high on the list of topics at the meeting, many people also expressed concern and anger over Dallas' unusually high rate of per capita water consumption, which exceeds those of every other city in the state.

Bill Ward said he was disappointed in what he perceived to be a lack of interest in conservation efforts from Dallas. "They have failed to show that they are even interested in exploring what they can do at conservation. They want us to provide an easy answer to them at our expense."

George Frost, a former football coach from Bowie County, stated his view that "if Region C would simply hold to the state average for conservation, their needs will be eliminated and simply become a want."

Rita Beving, Conservation Co-Chair of the Dallas Group Sierra Club, expressed a similar opinion.

"The bottom line is we're wasting water, especially when you look at the data and you look at Beaumont and Houston, which is far more industrial than Dallas will ever be in the north corridor, and they're using less water than we are," she contended. "If the north Dallas area would use 20 to 22-percent less water, we would still be using more water than a lot of cities in all of Texas."

According to the January 2001 Region C Water Plan developed for the Texas Water Development Board, the increased per capita water consumption has increased because the number of people per household have decreased while the development of large houses "with large lots, sprinkler systems, swimming pools, and other water-using amenities" have increased. In addition, the report says that many Region C communities are experiencing rapid commercial development. Other concerns were raised to the planning group as well.

"I'm concerned about our eroding tax base," said Linda Henderson, an educator out of Cass County. "If you submerge all of the land or give all of our land to mitigation, then our tax base will be narrower."

Bill Taylor, an employee of International Paper, Texarkana Mill, presented a letter to the Planning Group from Richard Ellis, the president of PACE Local 1148, a concerned labor union with around 600 members, objecting to the reservoir. The letter expressed the belief that should the Marvin Nichols Reservoir be built, it would cause International Paper holding ponds to fill beyond an environmentally safe capacity; increase the cost of timber and eliminate jobs associated with the industry; and threaten the flow from Wright Patman into the International Paper treatment facility "thereby threatening the drinking water for the local communities."

Following the public comment period, Tony Williams of Harrison County assured the crowds assembled that "the members of this board are all sitting here with open minds, and we still have a long way to go-it's not a done deal."

Until the reservoir is taken off of the list of possible water management strategies, however, environmentalists, representatives of the timber industry and private citizens intend to continue joining forces in their struggle to defeat it.