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Dwindling Lakes, Growing Water Demand in Central Texas

by **Kate Galbraith**

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Residents of Lake Travis have extended staircases and moved docks further out to accommodate lower lake levels. Some say the declining levels are bringing down property values.

On the cliffs surrounding Central Texas' large Lake Buchanan, a white ring extends some 13 feet above the shoreline, marking where the water reaches when the lake is full. At nearby Lake Travis, staircases that once led to the water's edge now end well above it.

These two lakes serve as key water sources for dozens of cities and hundreds of farmers, as well as for several power plants. With Texas gripped by drought, water levels have fallen dramatically. Combined, the two lakes now hold 28 percent less water than their long-term average.

"This is scary," said Janet Caylor, who owns two marinas on Lake Travis, the larger of the two lakes, and has had to move her docks as lake levels drop.

The current drought, drier than any other October-through-May stretch in Texas history, has heightened the stakes in an already contentious long-term planning battle over water from these lakes, which feed the lower Colorado River as it runs southeast to the Gulf of Mexico. It has pitted fast-growing cities like Austin, which depend on the water for drinking and recreation, against rice farmers near the Gulf, who need vast amounts of water for irrigation. Lakeside residents and business owners like Caylor, frustrated by **dropping water levels**, want to keep the lakes as full as possible.

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Last week, the [Lower Colorado River Authority](#), a powerful state organization that controls the water in the two lakes and much of the river, [postponed](#) a controversial decision on whether to grant a contract to another major user. A coal plant planned near Bay City, downriver near the rice farmers, had sought to pay the LCRA \$55 million up front, plus additional fees, to build a reservoir and ensure a 40-year supply of water to cool the plant. LCRA officials say there is sufficient supply for the coal plant, called the White Stallion Energy Center. The facility's representatives say their water needs will not harm Lake Travis or its sister reservoir, Lake Buchanan. But lakeside residents are unconvinced, and the prospect of a water-hungry coal plant has angered environmentalists as well as farmers and others in the Colorado River basin.

The LCRA board also chose a new general manager last week, though how much this will affect the water planning process is unknown. The LCRA gets most of its revenue from electricity generation (including hydro-electric dams on its lakes) and transmission. But managing water, the main reason the organization was created in the 1930s, causes some of its biggest headaches.

More than 70 years ago, engineers dammed the Colorado River and created Lakes Buchanan and Travis largely to provide water for the growing region. (Other lakes in the Highland Lakes chain act mainly as spillways or hydropower generators.) In the decades since, lake levels have yo-yoed, with a prolonged trough during the 1950s, which still counts as the worst drought in Texas history.

Meanwhile, the population of Austin and other Central Texas

cities has exploded. Austin's water use nearly tripled between 1970 and 2010.

But the soaring urban consumption still does not match that of farmers, mainly rice growers near the coast, who collectively use more than twice the amount of LCRA water that Austin does. Rice farmers used the Colorado River water long before the LCRA's creation, and thanks partly to this history, they get the water far cheaper: The LCRA's city customers pay over 20 times more for their water than do rice farmers, although rice farmers pay hefty additional fees to cover the cost of delivering water to their fields, often via canals.

In exchange for cheaper water, rice farmers agree to allow their supply to be cut off or reduced in times of drought. In the past, however, they have never had their supplies reduced, to the frustration of lake residents and other water users.

This will most likely change. If the current drought does not abate soon — and the LCRA's meteorologist is not forecasting substantial rainfall at least until the fall — rice farmers could lose one of their two annual crops next year, according to Suzanne Zarling, the LCRA's executive manager of water services.

They are expected to lose more crops in the future under a 10-year water management plan that is in the works and will ultimately need approval by the LCRA and state environmental regulators.

Farmers are bracing for it.

"I'm not going to say it's going to devastate us," said Paul Sliva, a rice farmer in Matagorda County. "But it's going to put a hurt on us."

The long-term plan will require sacrifices all around. Austin, for example, would prefer to keep more water in the lakes than the evolving consensus allows, said Greg Meszaros, director of the Austin Water Utility, because if the lakes get too low, cities will

be asked to cut their water use, harming local landscapes. Austin already [restricts sprinkler use to twice a week](#), but the LCRA could ask Austin and other cities to enact further conservation measures as soon as this fall, if dry conditions reduce the lakes' combined volume to 900,000 acre-feet, said Zarling of the LCRA. The lakes, which dipped below that trigger in 2009, are currently at 1.2 million acre-feet.

Another consideration emphasized by environmentalists is keeping enough water flowing down the Colorado to nourish river organisms and ensure sufficient flows into Matagorda Bay, where the river empties into the Gulf. The bay's oysters are already suffering from higher salinity as the river flows decrease amid the drought.

“If we don't get a break in the drought between now and November, I'm predicting dire consequences for the oysters,” said Sammy Ray, a professor emeritus in the department of marine biology at Texas A&M University at Galveston.

Meanwhile, rice farmers — who are trying to cut their water use through conservation — and environmentalists both argue that waterlogged rice fields provide crucial wintertime habitat for waterfowl.

The LCRA is hunting for more water supplies. The organization recently got [approval from state environmental regulators](#) to store more water downriver from Lakes Travis and Buchanan and off the main Colorado flow, a key first step in potentially building new reservoirs. Groundwater, some of which is so brackish it might require desalination, is also being considered by the LCRA.

To many participants in the water planning process, the bottom line is clear: Water habits must adjust to new constraints.

“I think we have taken water for granted,” said Myron Hess, the Texas water programs manager for the National Wildlife

Federation. “And I do think attitudes about water have to change.”

Erika Aguilar and Matt Largey of KUT 90.5 FM, Austin’s NPR affiliate, contributed reporting. This is the first of a five-part series on the LCRA, "Water Fight," that will run this week in The Texas Tribune and on KUT.

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