

Act now, before droughts get any more harmful

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Water flowing into the Highland Lakes is down to a trickle, and Central Texas continues to break high temperature and low rainfall records. Experts now warn these drought conditions could continue into 2012.

Given this reality, the National Wildlife Federation and the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club urge our region's water providers to revisit their drought contingency plans and adopt stronger measures to reduce water use before our water supplies are further compromised.

The state climatologist recently declared this year the most severe one-year drought period on record and the second most severe overall drought in the state's history.

More than 90 percent of the state is suffering from extreme or exceptional drought. As readers are probably all too well aware, we have a problem.

Drought contingency plans are critically important to ensuring sufficient water during times of drought. Required by the state for every public water supplier, they mandate actions to be taken to reduce water demand and extend water supplies during droughts based on trigger levels, such as reservoir storage, aquifer levels, or water treatment capacity.

The City of Austin's plan requires the implementation of Stage 2 water-saving measures when the combined storage of lakes Travis and Buchanan drops below 900,000 acre feet of water, which is expected to occur next week.

However, one major flaw has become evident in recent months.

These plans fail to take into consideration forecasted climate conditions like we are currently facing in determining when to adopt additional conservation measures.

The plans are reactive, calling for action only where already low lake and aquifer levels drop farther, rather than proactively working to protect water supplies.

When all signs point to continued record drought conditions, we must do better than business as usual as we watch our water supplies diminish rapidly.

The Pedernales River and other major tributaries that flow into the Highland Lakes, our region's water supply reservoirs, are drying up, and others in the area are down to a trickle.

Between January and July of this year, the amount of water flowing into the lakes was even less

than during the 1950s "drought of record," and the inflows in July were less than 1 percent of average, according to LCRA.

As a result of these reduced flows, above-normal evaporation rates and authorized water use, lake levels are dropping at a rapid rate — a visual indicator of the amount of water available for drinking, watering our lawns, supporting industry, and sustaining farms and ranches until the end of this drought.

And no relief is in sight.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration forecasts the continuation of high temperatures and little to no rain through October.

Barring the arrival of relief from a tropical storm, dry weather could continue through this winter. Making matters worse, La Nina conditions are predicted to return, which would extend the drought into 2012.

A vast majority of Central Texas communities remain only in Stage 1 drought restrictions, the lowest level of mandatory water conservation measures.

Increasing water-saving measures now, before water supplies drop even further, is a prudent choice that would protect future water supplies, our economy and the environment.

Some water providers have already taken proactive steps during this summer, including the cities of Round Rock and Bandera and the Lakeway Municipal Utility District. We praise them for these efforts, but urge them and others to do more to prepare for the future by adopting additional drought contingency measures now.

Let's heed the warnings of our state climatologist and NOAA and take proactive steps today to protect the remaining water in our lakes and rivers.

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For information on the Texas Living Waters, visit www.TexasWaterMatters.org.

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