

LCRA board to consider drought relief measures

For Immediate Release: September 14, 2011 03:35 PM

Because of the severe and ongoing drought, the Lower Colorado River Authority's Board of Directors will consider asking the state for permission to reduce or cut off water from the Highland Lakes to farmers next year. The Board will discuss this and other options for managing the drought at its Water Operations Committee meeting on Sept. 20 and its next meeting on Sept. 21.

This comes as new projections show that the combined storage of lakes Travis and Buchanan, the region's water supply reservoirs, could drop to 640,000 to 680,000 acre-feet by January 1. This would move the lakes very close to the 600,000 acre-foot level that would trigger a declaration that conditions are worse than during the worst drought in the state's history, the 10-year drought of the 1940s and 50s.

"These are unprecedented conditions, and it's important to evaluate options to protect our municipal and industrial customers while balancing the needs of agriculture," said General Manager Becky Motal.

The Board will consider several options for asking the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) to deviate from the state-approved Water Management Plan. The plan determines who must reduce water use, and when, from lakes Travis and Buchanan in times of drought.

The Board will discuss reducing or eliminating the amount of Highland Lakes water released to LCRA agricultural customers next year, depending on the amount of water in the two lakes on January 1. One proposal is to cut off water from the Highland Lakes to farmers if the water stored in the two lakes is less than 920,000 acre-feet on January 1 and the long-term forecast is for dry or average weather. If the long-term forecast on January 1 changes and above average rain is expected, water will be released from the lakes to farmers if the amount stored in the lakes is greater than 850,000 acre-feet. This proposal addresses the possibility that some rain may occur before Jan. 1, possibly from a tropical storm, that would add water to the Highland Lakes but may not otherwise change the extremely dry weather pattern we are in now.

As of September 14, the combined storage of the two lakes was 812,000 acre-feet and the weather forecast calls for below-normal rainfall through fall and winter.

The goal would be to select a level so that water is not released to start a crop next year and then cut off mid-crop. This would waste the water since the crop would not be able to mature. If water supply levels reach 600,000 acre-feet next year, LCRA's Board would take action to cut off water from the Highland Lakes to downstream farmers, according to its current plan, and work with municipal and industrial customers to reduce their use by 20 percent.

The Board also will discuss other options for managing the water supply during this extreme drought, including:

- Methods of increasing Board oversight of the process for considering new municipal and industrial water contracts during this extreme drought;
- Requiring separate agricultural water contracts for first and second crops (this could be a permanent policy); and
- Temporarily amending LCRA's downstream water rights to allow municipal and industrial customers to use water from the river when it is not being used by agriculture. This would reduce the amount of water downstream customers need from the Highland Lakes.

LCRA can only deviate from the state-approved Water Management Plan or

use its downstream water rights to meet industrial and municipal needs with permission from the TCEQ. The Board is considering asking for TCEQ approval because of the extreme drought that is gripping the state and the lower Colorado River basin. The 11 months from October 2010 through August 2011 have been the driest for that 11-month period in Texas since 1895, when the state began keeping rainfall records. And Texas' summer has been the hottest in the nation's history.

The oppressively hot and dry weather has increased evaporation on the Highland Lakes and reduced the flows in the tributaries that feed the lakes to a trickle. Between January and August, the amount of water flowing into the lakes, called inflows, was less than 10 percent of average. Inflows in June, July and August were less than 1 percent of average.

"If the dry weather continues, we will reach levels that we have not reached before in previous droughts," Motal said. "We recognize that all of LCRA's customers would face financial and operational hardships. LCRA is considering these difficult decisions very carefully as we carry out our responsibility to manage the region's water supply in a fair and responsible manner."

 [Print this page](#)

[Purchasing](#) | [Open Records](#) | [Ask LCRA](#) | [Sitemap](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

© 1996-2011 Lower Colorado River Authority. All rights reserved.