

In wake of Texas drought, water and politics mix

By Asher Price, Austin American-Statesman

Updated: 5:28 a.m. Monday, July 30, 2012

Published: 10:19 p.m. Sunday, July 29, 2012

On a hot day in mid-July, Agriculture Commissioner Todd Staples visited a steamy chamber of a North Austin Home Depot teeming with plants to promote his newest initiative, Texas Water Smart, which encourages homeowners to conserve water.

Not a cent of tax money is being spent on the campaign, and in a budget crunch, no tax dollars spent seems like something to cheer about.

Meanwhile, the chief state-sponsored water conservation strategy is practically dormant, with a modest budget that leaves no room for advertising or outreach.

That dynamic has left water conservation messaging to companies that favor a mild conservation strategy.

The situation speaks to a larger issue, of officials seeing political benefit in talking about water conservation and water supply, but still far away from spending the needed money — estimated at \$53 billion in coming decades — or political capital to seriously address the state's water problem.

In short, just as water has become important to politicians, water conservation itself has become political. In the drought of 2011, as watering restrictions grew more draconian, landscaping companies faced a grim future. Lawn watering became not only unfashionable but downright illicit.

Landscapers "were really afraid of being run out of business if outdoor watering were completely shut off," said C.E. Williams, general manager of the Panhandle Groundwater Conservation District and member of the state Water Conservation Advisory Council. "That was their fear that got them started down this road."

That fall, companies — led by Scotts Miracle-Gro and joined by Home Depot, Wal-Mart and the Texas Nursery and Landscape Association, among others — landed on the Water Smart campaign as a middle-road approach to conservation as the state grapples with long-term lawn watering.

After considering a host of spokespeople, they picked Staples as a trusted voice on water issues.

In September, Scotts Miracle-Gro contributed \$1,250 to Texans for Todd Staples.

At the Home Depot presser, Scotts Miracle-Gro's southwest region president, Jim Tates, who gave \$200 to the commissioner in December, stood next to Staples.

The Water Smart initiative currently has a budget of \$500,000. No state dollars are used, said Bryan Black, a spokesman for Staples.

Texas already happens to have at least one water conservation program.

But by comparison, the Water IQ program has an annual budget of only about \$100,000, and no funding for media outreach, advertising or program promotion, said Merry Klowmower, a spokeswoman for Texas Water Development Board.

Water IQ's progress has been piecemeal. The Lower Colorado River Authority and the City of Austin are among the few major entities to have promoted the plan.

At a March meeting, many Texas Water Conservation Advisory Council members said they were concerned about duplicative efforts of Texas Water Smart and about possibly confusing audiences with multiple messages, according to meeting minutes.

"We're not trying to change messages local municipalities are using," said Brian Mayes, a spokesman for the Water Smart initiative.

The employees of the companies sponsoring the Water Smart initiative, which has a wide membership that includes some cities, "work and live here in Texas and in a crisis want to rally together," said Mayes.

Ken Kramer, director of the Lone Star chapter of the Sierra Club, who said he welcomes any water-saving promotion, had a different take: "They want to try to be seen and be out there promoting water use techniques so their business can continue existence and not be seen as water hogs."

At the Home Depot event, Bryan Shaw, the chairman of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, who has acted as Staples' wingman on the water initiative, delivered the middle-ground message of the Water Smart campaign:

"The common-sense oriented (watering tips do not mean) your yard should look like the Sahara desert," he said. "Most (water-saving) programs tell you what you can't do. This one tells you what you can do.

"You can still enjoy a lush, beautiful landscape and use less water," Shaw said.

The Water Smart campaign, which amounts to a website and radio and television public service advertisements, promotes basic, sensible watering tips: Homeowners ought to water early in the morning to reduce evaporation; adjust sprinklers so that they water lawns, not sidewalks or driveways; and use plenty of mulch to keep gardens and flower beds moist.

"Making water conservation a part of your daily life is something every Texan can do to ensure we have water tomorrow and into the future," Staples told a group of reporters at the press conference.

For Staples, who will run for lieutenant governor in 2014, it was a successful day as he introduced himself to urban voters — he also appeared in San Antonio — and associated himself with a seemingly winning issue in drought-minded Texas.

Earlier Water Smart press conferences were held in Dallas, Amarillo and Lubbock.

Staples is not the only candidate for lieutenant governor who has addressed water issues this year. Earlier in July, Land Commissioner Jerry Patterson said he would investigate the possibility of building a desalination plant in Central Texas, and in February, state Comptroller Susan Combs, another likely candidate, released a report, "The Impact of the 2011 Drought and Beyond."

To Kramer, with the Sierra Club, those stances make political sense.

"It's very clear that water, because of the drought in 2011 and continuing in many parts of Texas, is an issue on the minds of a lot of people, including public officials," Kramer said. "Public officials are sort of pursuing what I'd call enlightened self-interest. Any politician running for office or higher office has to be seen as doing something about water issues."

Williams puts it more bluntly: "Water conservation has gotten pretty sexy lately. It's politically correct today."

But actually getting politicians to raise money to create water projects, which are forecast to cost as much as \$53 billion over decades, will be a harder task.

Even sides that agree that conservation efforts need to be improved can't agree on who should bear the onus.

At the Austin event, Staples never talked about limiting water for farmers and ranchers, who still use roughly half the state's water, even as some, such as Colorado River rice farmers, have faced at least temporary cutbacks.

About a week later, when environmental group Environment Texas said the Legislature should require water metering on farmland, which has been found to cut water use by at least 10 percent, Staples sounded a defensive note.

"Blaming agriculture is hogwash," he shot back. "Modern agriculture has been doing more with less for decades."

"Agriculture may be a convenient target for accusations of wasteful water usage, but it's actually more efficient than ever, and its impressive return-on-investment provides our country with a reliable domestic food supply," Staples said.

Finger pointing won't raise money, said Laura Huffman, director of the Nature Conservancy of Texas.

"Our growing population is going to want access to food, water and energy," she said. "You can't pit food against water or water against energy or energy against food."

Republicans dominate the Legislature and occupy the governor's mansion, and in a reflection of their wider anxieties about raising revenues — either through, say, a water bottle tax or a small tap fee on homeowners' water bills — the Legislature is likely to vote down a money-raising scheme in the coming legislative session.

Such an effort in the last session never even got a floor vote. At a discussion on water issues in July at the LBJ Library sponsored by Texas Monthly, only one panelist — the only elected official — said projects could be built without raising revenue through fees or taxes: Staples.

Contact Asher Price at 445-3643

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