

Long-awaited Lake Ralph Hall in Fannin County may get approval next year, officials say



Lara Solt/Staff Photographer

Tom Taylor, of the Upper Trinity Regional Water District, looks for fossils in the dry bed of the North Sulphur River, which could one day be covered by Lake Ralph Hall. Taylor says the lake would resolve “a catastrophic example of man-made erosion.”

By Wendy Hundley, Staff Writer, Dallas Morning News, Published 10/20/2012, 9:17 PM

LADONIA — The dry corpses of upended trees are scattered like firewood in the North Sulphur River bed, where the next hard rain could topple other trees and shrubs that cling precariously to the steep banks.

“The water really flows fast and it gets high,” says Ladonia Mayor Jan Cooper as she stands in the flat riverbed on the outskirts of this rural community about 70 miles northeast of Dallas.

Cooper hopes this 60-foot-deep channel will one day form an underwater trench of Lake Ralph Hall, a proposed reservoir that would cover 11,800 acres of southeastern Fannin County.

The project, which has been on the books for a decade, might get approval as early as next year, said Tom Taylor, executive director of the Upper Trinity Regional Water District, which supplies water to 25 communities in Denton County and surrounding areas.

Water district officials are stepping up a public information campaign aimed at generating support before a hearing in January before the State Office of Administrative Hearings.

If Lake Ralph Hall gets the go-ahead, the water district's 2003 water use permit request must then be approved by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Taylor is confident the project will become a reality.

In fact, the water district has already acquired about one-third of the 12,000 acres needed, including a house that's earmarked to become a Visitors Center on the southern shore of the lake.

Supporters say Lake Ralph Hall, named after the longtime Texas congressman from Rockwall, would help address future water needs in the fast-growing region.

If approved, it would be the first major water supply reservoir authorized for North Texas in 30 years.

"It's a defense against a future water crisis," said Taylor, noting that the project would provide millions of gallons of water for the region and solve an 80-year-old environmental problem at the same time.

In the 1920s, the meandering North Sulphur was prone to flooding fields of adjacent farms. To provide relief, a 20-mile-long channel — 16 feet wide, 10 feet deep — was dug to improve drainage.

The solution fixed the flooding problem but created another: Erosion began to eat away the channel, which has grown to 60 feet deep and 300 feet wide, and destroyed hundreds of acres along its banks.

"It will stop the erosion problem in this part of the river," Taylor said of Lake Ralph Hall. "Every other strategy to stop the erosion has not worked."

Opposition

But not everyone is on board with the \$250 million project.

Two environmental groups and the town of Flower Mound, which is a member of the Upper Trinity Regional Water District, are expected to testify in opposition to the project in January.

Flower Mound officials have raised questions about the water district's financial condition. They say that the agency has overbuilt infrastructure, based on inflated population estimates, and that the proposed lake would be prone to heavy sediment buildup.

Taylor has denied the allegations, saying the water district is financially sound and population estimates are based on projections from the state and its own customers.

Environmentalists say that a lake would destroy agricultural land and wildlife habitat, and that other measures could be taken to conserve water and use it more efficiently.

Building a dam for Lake Ralph Hall would reduce the water flowing downstream, affecting fish and other organisms, said Myron Hess, manager of Texas water programs for the National Wildlife Federation.

"We feel a reservoir should be the last option because of the huge impact it has," said Janice Bezanson, executive director of the Texas Conservation Alliance.

But Taylor says the lake would create a wetland area for wildlife and finally resolve "a catastrophic example of man-made erosion."

Hess agrees that the North Sulphur River has been seriously degraded.

"But that doesn't justify cutting the water downstream," he said.

And Bezanson said there's debate over the erosion issue.

"It will end up flooding more acres than you lose to erosion," she said.

Not fighting

While a number of landowners in the area had fought the project, they've withdrawn their request to contest the project at the January hearing.

"We're still opposed to it, but we don't have the money or resources to fight it," said Angela Scott, whose family owns 300 acres near the site.

"My great-grandfather came here as a runaway slave at age 13. This is our home."

Taylor said he understands the connection that people have to their land.

"We're buying land from those who have approached us," he said.

"We're allowing them to continue to live on or farm the land."

He said no land has been acquired through eminent domain and condemnation would be a last resort. "We'll try our darndest to reach an agreement," he said.

Cooper, the Ladonia mayor, said most of the town's residents support the project.

She believes Lake Ralph Hall would become a fishing and recreational area that would draw tourists and bring economic growth to the community of about 600.

"The best thing to happen is for it to get started," she said.

<http://www.dallasnews.com/news/state/headlines/20121020-long-awaited-lake-ralph-hall-in-fannin-county-may-get-approval-next-year-officials-say.ece?ssimg=755974>

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