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Meeting Texas' water needs

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CORPUS CHRISTI—Texas faces serious challenges in meeting water needs while also maintaining the jobs and businesses dependent upon our fish and wildlife resources and protecting our state's priceless natural heritage.

At a time when our state faces many competing financial needs — for education, transportation, and other vital services — prudent choices must be made to determine the appropriate role for state funding for any water supply project or strategy. Local and regional water suppliers say that state financial assistance is needed to fund about half of the total \$53 billion price tag for water infrastructure projects in the current State Water Plan. However, simply providing funding without improving the plan and carefully prioritizing projects to be funded would not be an efficient use of taxpayer funds.

Texas needs a comprehensive State Water Plan that incorporates drought response measures and addresses in-stream flow and freshwater inflow needs. We also need clear metrics for determining which projects merit state financial assistance.

Only with those changes can Texas realistically meet future water supply needs affordably while protecting our natural heritage. The State Water Plan as currently written will not achieve those objectives.

We recommend the state embrace a strategic and cost-effective approach to meeting Texas water needs by:

Improving the State Water Plan:

The plan should be revised to show projections for actual water needs rather than water "demands," which may be unrealistic to meet in future drought years. Effective drought response measures during very dry years to reduce nonessential water uses should be broadly incorporated into the plan. The plan should also be revised to include all water needs — including water to support the health of our rivers and bays — as well as commercial and recreational fishing, river and coastal tourism, and other industries that depend on adequate river flows and freshwater inflows for their survival.

Funding for Instream Flow and Freshwater Inflow Protection:

Any state water funding mechanism should dedicate a reasonable amount of funds — at least 5 percent — to implement voluntary, on-the-ground measures to help keep rivers flowing and provide freshwater inflows to bays and estuaries. This should include

incentives for enhanced land stewardship and support for research to help refine flow requirements.

Funding for Water Conservation and Water Reuse:

Any new mechanism for financing water management strategies in the plan should set aside at least one-third of available funds for the implementation of effective water conservation programs and water reuse projects, with no more than half of that money allocated to reuse. Qualifying activities must be clearly defined. Prioritizing conservation is the most cost-effective way to meet future water needs in Texas.

Funding for Water Infrastructure Projects:

The state should establish clear metrics for determining which water infrastructure projects in the plan merit state financial assistance. The metrics should reflect the following principles:

- * Priority consideration should go to water supply projects designed to meet near-term needs that cannot reasonably be met through water efficiency measures.
- * Prioritization criteria should reward projects that are highly cost effective, include measures to ensure the new water supply will be used efficiently, and result in low environmental impact.
- * There must be a firm commitment for substantial funding from local and regional water supply interests and a demonstration that full funding from those interests is not feasible (absent extenuating circumstances).
- * In the case of groundwater projects, assistance should only be provided to projects clearly shown not to indirectly impair existing water supply sources, including spring flows or river flows.

As we move forward in the 21st century, Texas clearly needs a comprehensive and fiscally-responsible approach to providing water to sustain the people and the environment of Texas. We can accomplish that goal by refining the State Water Plan to better define our true water needs and by developing a state funding mechanism that provides for more efficient use of already developed water resources and for protection of fish and wildlife — while strategically targeting state financial assistance for critical infrastructure projects to address unmet needs.

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