

Texas' state water plan calls for heavy dose of conservation

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AUSTIN — The state is running out of water. So much so that Texans may need to brace for quick showers, low-flush toilets and irrigation restrictions.

That's a slice of the water-saving steps that are being talked about as the Legislature considers bankrolling larger projects and other incentives for voluntary conservation.

Advocates for a new "conservation culture" want water-wasting to one day be as taboo as the littering vilified in "Don't Mess With Texas" ads.

The state's future water supply may depend on it. Conservation accounts for a whopping 24 percent of new supplies in a state water plan that looks ahead 50 years, offering a long list of ideas to ensure water availability keeps pace with Texas' booming population.

"It can be painless. We just have to get started," said former Sen. Kip Averitt, who chaired the Senate Natural Resources Committee. He's now a board member for the nonprofit group H204Texas, which is pressing for implementation of the water plan.

Texas' severe drought has grabbed the attention of legislators, business groups and others — and Capitol leaders are making water a priority this session.

Water restrictions regularly take hold in Dallas and many North Texas communities in times of little rainfall.

True conservation, though, is more than imposing immediate drought restrictions and would help places like Dallas-Fort Worth cope with immense growth, Averitt said.

His group, the Texas Association of Realtors and the Austin Board of Realtors are promoting a forum Wednesday to talk about water needs and solutions.

San Antonio system

Water advocates often point to San Antonio as an example of a place that has dealt with its water supply effectively through conservation.

The San Antonio Water System tells residents that for \$10 to \$20 an average homeowner can install high-efficiency showerheads, replace aerators on faucets and repair dripping faucets and leaking toilets, saving 10,000 to 25,000 gallons of water a year for a family of four. The agency says it offers up to two free water-efficient toilets to replace "old water-wasting thrones."

"Conservation efficiency is a water supply," said Amy Hardberger, an assistant professor at St. Mary's University Law School in San Antonio who specializes in water. Lawn irrigation is the starting point for considerable savings, she said.

Homeowners should make sure there are no leaks in an irrigation system, avoid watering sidewalks and driveways and be sure to water no more than necessary, water advocates say. Setting an irrigation system to automatically run on a timer, even when it's raining or the ground is already moist, is a no-no.

Financial enticements or rebates have been successful in residential conservation, and incentives — not mandates — will encourage farmers to switch to more efficient watering methods such as drip irrigation, Hardberger said.

Those kinds of programs are envisioned in legislation filed by Rep. Allan Ritter, R-Nederland, chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, intended to carry out the ambitious state water plan.

The five-year plan, which the Texas Water Development Board issued last year after regional input, notes that the state's population is expected to soar from its current 25 million to 46 million in 50 years, with water demand projected to increase 22 percent.

The plan identified \$53 billion in necessary construction projects but said 24 percent of the future water supply, or 651.6 billion gallons per year, would need to come from municipal and agricultural conservation.

Ritter's bill would create a loan fund to pay for major projects and would allocate \$2 billion from the state's rainy day fund for that account. At least 20 percent would go toward water conservation, reuse or education efforts.

It could cover local programs to replace old toilets and water fixtures, but could pay for major construction projects that contain elements of conservation, according to Ritter's office.

In a sign of how important water is becoming in the Legislature, business interests are pushing the water plan.

Business support

The Texas Association of Business recently spoke in support of Ritter's legislation. And at an event near the Capitol this month, Agriculture Commissioner Todd Staples led a luncheon that was part fundraiser, part pep rally for conservation through the business-backed group Texas Water Smart.

"We know that the least expensive type of water available is water that we conserve," Staples said.

Among tips shared that day: Water your lawn in the morning and evening, not in the heat of the day or when it's windy. Landscape with native plants suited to your climate. Limit water use when bathing and showering.

Hardberger predicted Texans will learn to act differently through more conservation efforts, and she said that creates a less expensive starting point for the next state water plan.

"Change takes a little bit of time," she said, "but we're capable of it."

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AT A GLANCE: A call to action

Rep. Allan Ritter wants to spend \$2 billion to help ensure the drought-prone state has enough water for its rapidly expanding population.

TOP FIVE THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT TEXAS' WATER NEEDS

1. The Texas Water Development Board last year issued a plan that looks ahead 50 years to the state's water needs. It identified \$53 billion in projects and said 24 percent of the future water supply should come from conservation.
2. Texas' population is projected to jump from its current 25 million to 46 million by 2060, and demand for water is expected to increase 22 percent during that time. But existing water supplies are estimated to decline about 10 percent.
3. Without needed water supply projects or new water management strategies, income losses of \$11.9 billion annually could occur in Texas if the current drought approaches the drought of record of the 1950s, according to the plan.

4. Ritter wants to take \$2 billion from the state's emergency reserves to bolster infrastructure, including water treatment plants, new dams and reservoirs.

5. Under his bill, at least 20 percent of the funding must be used for water conservation, reuse and education projects. That could cover financial incentives to replace old toilets with low-flush toilets in homes.

OTHER IDEAS IN THE BOARD'S PLAN

- Weather modification, such as cloud seeding to boost the chances of rain.
- Brush control, meaning the targeted removal of water-hoarding brush and trees, especially in West Texas.
- Aquifer storage and recovery, injecting potable water into viable underground formations, keeping it safe from evaporation and contamination.
- Rainwater harvesting, using various collection systems, for landscape irrigation, drinking and other uses.
- Desalination, the process of removing salt from seawater or brackish water to produce drinkable potable water.

From staff and wire reports

<http://www.dallasnews.com/news/state/headlines/20130122-texas-state-water-plan-calls-for-heavy-dose-of-conservation.ece>