

# Collaborative conservation key to ensuring adequate resources

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Opinion Piece By Andrew Sansom | February 2, 2013

Make no mistake about it. We are in a crisis here in Texas where water is concerned. Consider these facts: Our population is essentially going to double in the next half-century or so and we have already given permission for more water to be withdrawn from many of our rivers than is actually in them today.

Exacerbating this frightening circumstance is the fact that we have been experiencing a severe drought for the last couple of years and it may go on for a while. We have traditionally considered the drought of the 1950s as the "drought of record," meaning as bad as it can get, but it is becoming increasingly apparent that that is an assumption we simply cannot afford to make. Every year this current drought continues will cost the economy of Texas an annual \$11.9 billion and 115,000 jobs.

Thankfully, in recent weeks, state leaders have indicated that meeting our water needs will be a high priority in the current legislative session. As a result, bills have been introduced in both the Texas House and the Senate to take as much as \$2 billion from the state's Rainy Day Fund and finance needed water infrastructure. These actions are welcome and appropriate, particularly given efforts by the sponsors to carve out funding specifically for water conservation and to prioritize which projects would be funded.

Hopefully, the Legislature will take action to provide needed funding for water. If they do, however, we must resist the assumption that the problem will be solved. No matter how much we spend on new water infrastructure, the reality is, we simply cannot build our way out of this one.

First, because 95 percent of the landscape of Texas is owned by private citizens, virtually all of our watersheds, all of our recharge zones and all of the countryside where the raindrops fall are on private property. In Texas, we lose rural and agricultural land faster than any other state. We must find a way to keep our landowner-stewards on the land and doing the right thing to ensure continued water for the rest of us.

Second, we waste too much water in Texas. The cities of San Antonio and El Paso have reduced their consumption of water by a full 40 percent per capita and yet they have continued to grow. In many of our major Texas cities, water consumption per capita is still increasing. There are cities in Texas that lose 25 to 30 percent of their water supplies simply through poorly maintained or aging water mains. We must understand that the easiest water for us to get for our future is the water we already have and we can get it simply by being more efficient in the way we manage and use it.

To date, in spite of the passage of legislation to protect the ecosystems of our rivers and streams and our bays and estuaries, the state has done little to ensure the maintenance of "environmental flows"

which keep those systems healthy. Not only does continued neglect of critical environmental water needs threaten some of Texas most important aquatic ecosystems, including Galveston Bay, but our unwillingness to deal with this issue will ultimately invite the federal government to assume a role in every river basin where federally listed endangered species are present.

Finally, we treat groundwater, which lies beneath the landscape and surface water, which forms our rivers and lakes as if they were a different substance. Groundwater is considered the private property of the landowners above and surface water is considered the property of the state. We can't have it both ways. Today, property owners with wells at the head of our river basins and water rights holders downstream have both been told by the state that they own the same water. This disconnect between groundwater and surface water is unsustainable and a recipe for endless lawsuits in the years ahead.

In the 1950s we were essentially a rural state where everyone knew exactly what the lack of rainfall meant to our economy and quality of life. That drought spurred all modern water planning and infrastructure which has served us for the last half-century. This time, while the legislative signs are encouraging, we must not allow them to deter us from addressing the underlying water problems that threaten our childrens' futures.

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