

## **WATER PLAN GETS LOW POLL MARKS**

By Prashansa Sai, Texarkana Gazette  
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A Texas water plan for the next half-century has the public at odds with state officials over how to meet Texas' future water needs, according to the results of a poll released earlier this month by the National Wildlife Federation. The statewide poll, commissioned by the NWF and conducted by the Tarrance Group, Inc., a national polling firm, found that Texas voters, by a ratio of 2 to 1, strongly favor implementing water conservation efforts before expensive dams and pipelines are built.

"Texas is getting ready to spend billions of dollars on environmentally devastating projects that, in many cases, frankly aren't necessary," said Susan Kaderka, Director of the NWF's Austin office. Some of these projects include three new reservoirs recommended both by the Texas Water Development Board and 15 North Texas counties. The largest of the reservoirs would be the Marvin Nichols I reservoir on the Sulphur River in East Texas.

Scheduled to be completed in 2030, the \$1.7 billion project would cover as much as 72,000 acres in Red River, Morris and Titus counties and deliver 161 billion gallons of water per year (or 80 percent) to the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex via 172 miles of pipeline.

"I understand that we need to be looking to the future and how the state is going to meet the water needs of the population growth ... but there are a number of lakes around the state that are being vastly under-utilized ... the water is just sitting there in reserve or being used for recreational purposes," said Oran Caudle, a Texarkana-based consultant. "And the results of this poll show that ... despite what legislators, special interest groups and the basin authorities are saying, Texans know better, and are a lot wiser than they realized."

Mike Burke, administrator of the Sulphur River Basin Authority -- the organization that would own, operate and manage the Marvin Nichols reservoir, if built -- refused to comment on the results of the poll, stating that he could not form an opinion on a survey he had not seen.

Attempts to reach the authority's president, Mike Huddleston, were unsuccessful.

Other survey findings suggest that voters were critical of the State Water Plan not only because of a lack of water conservation, but in allocations of too little water for fish and wildlife, and incomplete economic analysis of proposed strategies. In fact, 93 percent of all Texas voters say it is

important for Texas to provide adequate protection for rivers, bays and wildlife as it plans for water needs for the next fifty years. Ninety-one percent believe that water supply projects should be proven to be cost-effective to qualify for state funding.

The poll was conducted as a part of an outreach campaign by the NWF and other public interest groups including the Sierra Club, the Texas Center for Policy Studies and the Environmental Defense. Surveyed were 800 registered Texas voters between April 28 and May 2, 2002. The margin of error is + or - 3.5 percent.

"The results of this poll show that voters don't trust the planning that has been done by the politicians and the fact that they're not concerned with the economic or environmental effects of it," said Dr. James Presley, Ph.D and member of Friends United for a Safe Environment. "The people don't want to destroy the precious land, especially the thousands of acres of bottomland hardwood forest that the lake would inundate, and build large, expensive reservoirs in their place to supply unneeded water."

Opponents of the reservoir say building it would destroy 30,000 acres and take a toll on the timber industry. Bill Ward, a devout opponent of the reservoir, is the owner of a lumber yard in Linden, Texas. "The biggest impact this lake is going to have on my business is that it's going to take 25 percent of the available hardwood timber off the market," said Ward of Ward Timber Industry. "The most important part of our message ... is that Marvin Nichols is not needed, and that there are more environmentally-friendly and economically-feasible ways to provide water for the big cities."

Besides visiting with dozens of civic groups in various Northeast Texas cities, Ward will also take his message to the Texarkana Chamber of Commerce, a group that recently took a public stand in favor of the reservoir.

"I am currently being briefed on the issue, and my main concern is that we're looking at this with an educated eye," said Jim Cherry, successor to former chamber president Swede Lee. "Mike Craven and I have visited with Bill Ward, and we have invited him to make a presentation at an upcoming board meeting ... I believe it's the only fair thing to do. The Chamber may choose to stay on the same course, or they may choose a different position on the issue. I don't know, but in the meantime, it's my job that they hear both sides of the decision [sic] and make an informed decision."

Lt. Governor Bill Ratliff and District I State Rep. Barry Telford, both of whom have expressed unequivocal support for the State Water Plan and its proposed project to construct Marvin Nichols, were unavailable for comment.

"Above anything this poll just shows us that Texans are against the wasteful practices that are so prevalent in this country," said Max Shumake, president of the Sulphur Oversight Society, and a fierce opponent of the proposed Marvin Nichols reservoir. "Particularly, here in America, we have a tendency not to conserve our natural resources ... we need to leave something behind for our children and grandchildren. Though I am opposed to Marvin Nichols, I am not opposed to progress," Shumake said. "Hopefully the legislators will work with the people and start utilizing some of the already existing water sources in this state."