Rough Waters Ahead?

Conservationists say new water plan leaves little for fish, wildlife, recreation

Water development board to vote on plan May 16 at 9 a.m.
Travis Building, 1701 N. Congress Ave, Room 1-104

AUSTIN, TX—A new long-term water plan for the lower Colorado River basin would leave little water for fish, wildlife, and recreation and for the people whose livelihoods depend on those resources, conservation advocates say. The plan anticipates drastic changes to the region's water resources, including a 1.7 billion dollar pipeline to San Antonio.

"This plan envisions a radically different future for the water resources of the Lower Colorado region from what we see today," said Jennifer Walker, water resources specialist for the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club.

Among those differences:

- A 1.7 billion-dollar pipeline project will be constructed near the mouth of the Colorado River at Matagorda Bay. This pipeline will send 49 billion gallons of water annually to San Antonio.
- Matagorda Bay will get significantly less fresh water than it does currently, which could harm oysters, shrimp, fish, crabs and other wildlife.
- Groundwater pumping along the Gulf Coast will increase as groundwater replaces some of the surface water sent to San Antonio.
- Increased water use in urban areas means the Highland Lakes will fall to lower levels than ever before during prolonged dry periods.

"The San Antonio pipeline project is a central element of this plan," said Myron Hess, manager of Texas Water Programs for the National Wildlife Federation, "We have serious concerns about how sending that much water to San Antonio will affect Matagorda Bay."

Matagorda Bay is located at the mouth of the Colorado River and is where freshwater from the river mixes with saltier water from the Gulf of Mexico. This mix of salt and freshwater is essential to shrimp, fish, oysters, crabs, birds, and other wildlife.

Conservationists are particularly concerned about how the bay would be impacted during a drought. Preliminary studies by the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) indicate that during a prolonged dry period, freshwater flowing into the bay would drop to only a third of the lowest recorded level.

"During drought years, the mighty Colorado river would be reduced to a small fraction of its historical flow as it enters Matagorda Bay," Hess said. "We could see dramatic declines in oyster, shrimp, crab and fish populations, which would affect not only the bay itself, but also the economy that has grown up around fishing, shrimping, and bird watching."

In Colorado, Wharton and Matagorda counties, the plan calls for increased groundwater pumping in the Gulf Coast aquifer to help make up for the water sent to San Antonio. Parts of the aquifer could see long-term declines—up to 60 feet in places.

According to Hess, "Given these potentially serious impacts, it was premature of the planning group to recommend the San Antonio pipeline project in the plan." He noted that the planning group should

have qualified its endorsement of the project until it was able to consider the results of environmental studies scheduled to be completed in 2007.

In addition, the plan indicates that during a prolonged drought, the Highland Lakes would fall to lower levels than ever before. Projections show that the Buchanan-Travis system could go down as low as 212,000 acre-feet during a long dry period—just 30% of the lowest recorded volume to date.

"With the increase in urban populations, lake levels will be lower in the future. The only thing we can do about that, other than praying for rain, is to use water as efficiently as possible," said Walker. "The City of Austin—the biggest municipal water user in the region—ignored the excellent water conservation recommendations in the plan and set its own, less-ambitious target."

Austin is proposing to reduce its water use to about 155 gallons per person per day in 2060, down from about 175 gallons in 2006, roughly a 0.2 percent annual reduction. The plan otherwise recommends that municipalities reduce water use one percent per year until they reach 140 gallons per person per day.

"While this plan does get us pointed in the right direction, it is clear that the city could do more, and faster," said Walker, "The difference between one percent and 0.2 percent may not seem like much, but it would save roughly 25,000 acre-feet of water every year. During a dry year like the one we had in 2000, that's enough water to raise levels in Lake Travis 2.5 feet. Over time even a small savings can have a big impact."

The Lower Colorado planning region is a 14-county area along the Colorado River from Mills County to the Gulf of Mexico. The regional water plan was adopted by the planning group late last year and will be considered for approval by the Texas Water Development Board on May 16.

"The bottom line is that this regional water plan envisions major changes for the Highland Lakes, the Colorado River, groundwater resources, and Matagorda Bay," said Hess. "And some of those changes could cause serious problems."

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