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State water plan could leave Texas' fish and wildlife high and dry

Despite some improvements, water plan remains fatally flawed.

Today, as expected, the Texas Water Development Board approved its long-range water plan at the agency's board meeting in Austin. A coalition of conservation groups criticized the plan, saying it could harm fish and wildlife if implemented as written. The groups contend that the plan also fails to tap into the full potential of water conservation and drought management to meet the state's water needs.

"Everyone agrees Texas needs to take steps to secure water for the future, but this plan is a jumble of some very good ideas and some very bad ones," said Myron Hess, Manager of Texas Water Programs for the National Wildlife Federation. "It is an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink approach with a price tag to match."

It would cost \$31 billion to implement the strategies in the 2007 State Water Plan. Among other things, the plan calls for the construction of 14 major new dams and over 40 new pipelines.

"The state water plan represents a failed opportunity to break the state out of a 1950s mindset that favors large reservoirs and other expensive infrastructure as the primary means of addressing water supply demands, despite their huge environmental and financial costs," said Ken Kramer, Sierra Club state director. "What Texas needs and deserves is a water plan for the 21st century*one that focuses on conservation, efficiency, management, and technological advances, and one that recognizes that Texas needs to provide water for both people and the environment. The new state water plan is not that plan"

The conservation groups said that in some respects the 2007 water plan is an improvement over the 2002 water plan. For example, some regions improved their estimates of the potential for water conservation and two regions undertook detailed environmental assessments of their proposals. However, the water plan still suffers from serious flaws in several important areas:

Not enough water conservation. While some regions came up with good municipal water conservation recommendations, many other regions set unambitious goals or ignored municipal water conservation entirely. Water conservation has enormous promise for Texas' growing cities. For example, the city of San Antonio has cut per capita water consumption by forty percent over the past twenty years. Despite the city's rapid growth, water use is about the same today as it was two decades ago. In addition, water conservation is less expensive and less damaging than most other options.

Too many unneeded projects. For some regions, the recommended projects would result in double or triple the amount of water actually needed. The financial cost of this "if we build it, they will come" approach is too high, not to mention the damage this could cause Texas' rivers and bays. In addition, this kind of over-planning fails to meet the legislative directives for the planning process.

No drought management. The plan doesn't calculate the water or cost savings possible through the use of drought management measures. Instead of recognizing that some non-essential uses like lawn watering and car washing might be reduced during occasional serious droughts, the plan calls for building damaging and expensive reservoirs and pipelines that would only be needed to supply water for those types of non-essential uses during a severe drought.

'Unique reservoir' designations would hurt landowners. The plan recommends the Legislature designate 19 new sites for 'unique reservoir' status. Unfortunately, the plan doesn't consider the enormous negative impact such a designation would have for the property owners whose private property would be formally designated as a reservoir site.

According to Mary Kelly, Co-Director, Land, Water and Wildlife Program, Environmental Defense, the plan is lacking on another front. "Make no mistake, global warming is coming to Texas. Scientists predict it will mean longer and more severe droughts. We need a more innovative approach that doesn't rely so heavily on impounding more of our rivers and allowing the water to evaporate in the increased heat of a hotter climate."

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