

Billion-dollar water projects stand to drown us

Houston Chronicle - May 16, 2001

By KEN KRAMER

As another hot, dry summer approaches and the Texas Legislature gets ready to conclude its business, the outcome of a major piece of water legislation remains uncertain. The measure is supposed to help prepare Texas to cope with a growing population and withstand drought, but it could drastically affect our environment and our quality of life.

How we tackle key water issues will determine the economic and environmental future of Texas. We have a unique opportunity to meet both human and ecological water needs through conservation and forward-thinking management. But if we go back in time to a point when dams and pipelines dominated our water resource policy, we could fall prey to price gouging from water profiteers while our rivers, streams and aquifers go dry.

The water measure, Senate Bill 2, builds upon the regional water planning process initiated by former Lt. Gov. Bob Bullock in 1997. In order to be effective, this bill must protect current volumes of river and stream flows, enhance the water planning process, protect groundwater and steer clear of funding new water project boondoggles.

Ensuring adequate flows in our rivers and streams is critical -- without it we lose birds and wildlife, along with favorite summertime activities like canoeing, swimming and fishing. Moreover, the ability of a stream to cleanse itself of pollution depends greatly on the amount of water flow.

In our coastal regions, fresh water flows into bays, and estuaries are critical for sustaining aquatic life in the Gulf of Mexico, as well as the tourism and commercial fishing that depend upon a healthy ecosystem. For the first time in recorded history, the mouth of the Rio Grande is completely blocked by weeds and a sandbar. This is an ominous sign.

SB 2 should protect river flows by requiring regional water planning groups to address environmental water needs in their plans. The bill should also direct our state environmental agency to include provisions for in-stream uses in water rights permits and facilitate voluntary donations of existing water rights for conservation purposes.

The regional planning groups have worked hard and made valuable progress, but serious questions remain about the accuracy of the projected water demands and justifications for new dams and pipelines. With few exceptions, the regional plans fail to recognize significant opportunities for water conservation and drought management, which is far less expensive than costly

new water projects.

Instead, the regional plans call for a number of major new dams and pipelines to meet projected water demands, with a shocking price tag of almost \$17 billion. Unfortunately, few of the regional plans did any extensive economic analysis of proposed projects to determine which, if any, make sense from a cost-benefit standpoint.

Consider for example that the Dallas region estimates that it will "need" \$6 billion of that \$17 billion for new water projects. Yet the major water user in the region, the city of Dallas, predicts a per capita water use figure over the next 30 years that is higher than that of any other major Texas city. Dallas projects a per capita water use of 264 gallons per day by 2030, almost twice the per capita use expected for San Antonio. Dallas is the only major Texas city to predict an increase in per capita water use. A major dam is proposed to provide water for the region, but it would be unnecessary if the per capita water use in Dallas is kept in line with more conservation-minded cities.

This example raises serious questions about the claim that major new state funding for water projects is needed. It would be premature for SB 2 to establish new sources of funding for dams and pipelines, especially with the large cost to ratepayers. Consumers deserve a more thorough review of the need for these projects, and state planners should prioritize projects before any financial commitment is made to build them.

The decisions made now on SB 2 could have profound effects for generations. Our lawmakers can choose a common-sense approach that protects the environment while meeting human needs; or they can gamble on a statewide plumbing system that might end up filling the cup of water profiteers while emptying our rivers, streams and aquifers.

--

Kramer, based in Austin, is director of the Lone Star chapter of the Sierra Club