

## **Critics of state water plan make case for conservation**

By Kevin Carmody  
Austin American-Statesman Staff  
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Shirley Shumake and dozens of her Northeast Texas neighbors begged state water officials Thursday to save many of the state's oldest ranches from destruction.

The 800-acre cattle ranch near De Kalb that Shumake and five brothers operate is one of hundreds of homesteads across five counties that would be flooded by the Marvin Nichols Reservoir, part of a proposed state water plan designed to meet the water needs of Texas' burgeoning population through 2050.

But the real enemy, Shumake told Texas Water Development Board officials, is the wasteful water practices of the Dallas-Fort Worth area businesses and residents who would tap the \$1.7 billion reservoir on the Sulphur River.

"If someone was thirsty, I could understand," said Shumake, whose family has ranched in Northeast Texas since 1839. "But this is about people who let automatic sprinklers go off when it's raining. Dallas uses 33 percent more water per person than San Antonio, but has no real conservation plan."

The absence of meaningful water conservation efforts in some regions of the state was a recurring criticism of the draft water plan during two hearings Thursday in Austin. Environmental groups warned that the lack of conservation and innovative water supply strategies not only would lead to unneeded reservoirs, but would reduce the amount of water in rivers and flowing into bays and estuaries along the Gulf Coast.

"A critical lack of fresh water could have disastrous impacts on crab, mollusk and shrimp populations, and in turn sea turtles, whooping cranes, sport fishermen, guides and the whole array of commercial fisheries," said Erin Rogers of the state Sierra Club.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department expressed similar concerns last year.

The water plan -- 16 regional plans cobbled together -- calls for eight new reservoirs, including four on the Lower Colorado River and one on the Little River that would send 25 percent of its water to Williamson County. The dams and other major projects, including a 120-mile ground water

pipeline to San Antonio from the Bastrop area, would cost \$17.9 billion.

By 2050, the state's population is projected to increase by 90 percent to 39 million. Already, 441 water systems face shortages during drought, and the number could grow to 900 by 2050 if supplies remain unchanged, said Tommy Knowles, the board's deputy executive administrator.

It is the first time a water plan was developed by local officials in each region, rather than by the Water Development Board. The regional plans that contain projects such as reservoirs and pipelines will not change before the overall plan is adopted by the water board in late December and presented to the governor and legislative leaders Jan. 5. However, the water board could make policy changes directing regional water planners to make conservation a bigger priority in the next plan, due out in 2007.

"There is a lot of really good work in many of these plans, much of it by volunteers," said Mark MacLeod of Environmental Defense. "All of the problems we've identified can be fixed in the next round."

Yet observers remain concerned that regional water planners might continue to seek advice from engineering companies that stand to make millions if dams and other projects they recommend are built.

"A lot of old water projects on the shelf for years have been dusted off," MacLeod said.

The Marvin Nichols reservoir in Northeast Texas would flood 100 square miles. The Dallas area wouldn't need the reservoir if per-person water consumption could be cut by 22 percent over 50 years, officials say. By comparison, San Antonio used incentives to cut per capita use by 30 percent in 13 years.

But the North Texas officials say the reservoir is necessary because the potential for conservation is overblown.

"It should also be recognized that under drought circumstances, consumption will rise as householders seek to preserve their trees and lawns," said Irvin Rice, an engineer who helped draft the plan.

[kcarmody@statesman.com](mailto:kcarmody@statesman.com)