

# Water proposal crosses a bridge

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AUSTIN — Waving off 11th-hour appeals by environmentalists, the Texas Water Development Board approved the blueprint of a plan Wednesday designed to meet the San Antonio region's water needs for the next half-century.

The Region L plan, which affects 2.1 million people living in Bexar and 20 surrounding counties, was the last of 16 regional plans approved.

It had been held up this summer while water development board staffers challenged one of its major elements: a proposed \$600 million, 94,000 acre-foot water diversion from the lower Guadalupe River to the San Antonio Water System.

The unanimous decision Wednesday is not a final step, but it allows the various projects in the Region L plan — such as the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority water sale to SAWS — to seek permits from the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission.

"What today represents is a very positive endorsement of our region's efforts to find long-term answers to our region's water needs," said Joe Krier, president of the Greater San Antonio Chamber of Commerce.

"It's a very positive step forward," he added.

Region L planners were faced with providing an estimated 1.64 million acre-feet of water for the 4.5 million people who, it is projected, will live in the region by 2050.

"We are very relieved this day has finally arrived," said Region L Chairwoman Evelyn Bonavita of San Antonio.

The water plan places a priority on increased conservation efforts, which drew praise from environmentalists who noted that San Antonio already has the lowest per capita water use among the state's largest cities, and has a goal of reducing that further, to 132 gallons per person per day by 2050.

However, environmentalists warned that decreasing freshwater flows into Gulf Coast bays and estuaries, one of the consequences of the GBRA-SAWS deal, would have serious implications for wildlife.

Tom Stehn, with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, said reducing the amount of freshwater reduces the number of blue crabs, which make up 80 percent to 90 percent of the diet for whooping cranes, an endangered species.

Declining numbers of blue crabs and increased salinity of the cranes' water source — both caused, Stehn said, by a reduction in freshwater flows into the gulf — contributed to the deaths of six cranes last year.

"I believe the impact on the whooping cranes was not addressed in the plan and is a major environmental concern," Stehn said.

Dianne Wassenich, president of the San Marcos River Foundation, said the GBRA has shown little concern with the bays and estuaries issue.

GBRA Executive Director Bill West denied the charge.

"There is no question that we're concerned with the bays and estuaries. (They) are another user of the system; they are an important beneficiary of the Guadalupe basin. But not at the expense of everything else," he said. "We've got to balance the competing interests. We had more than 100 meetings, and never heard from the people who raised these issues today."

Norman Johns, a water resources scientist with the National Wildlife Federation, said the Region L plan is superior to most of the other state regional plans on environmental issues.

But, said Johns, Region L has the most complex hydrology.

"The take-home message," he warned, "is all of these projects come at greater and greater environmental and economic cost."

Noting there must be tradeoffs if Region L is to accommodate the water needs of a doubling population, board member Jack Hunt of Houston asked Johns if he had any ideas.

"There's no easy solution here," Johns replied.

West predicted the objections raised by environmentalists provided a "mini view of what will take place" when the GBRA-SAWS project goes before the TNRCC.

The regional water planning groups were a creation of the 1997 legislation, Senate Bill 1. Senate Bill 2, an effort to provide a financing mechanism for projects identified by those groups, passed this session, but without a funding source.

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