

Water conservation should be a top priority

From staff reports

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Northeast Texas residents need only to recall the dry boat ramps at Cooper Lake last summer to understand why we believe that water issues should be addressed by state lawmakers this session.

It seems like the future water demands for this growing state come up every session, but the issue often gets pushed to the back burner by lawmakers concerned with other issues. We believe that the future of this state requires that water issues become a priority.

“People don’t grasp the seriousness of water until the stream dries up or the tap doesn’t flow,” Mary Kelly, senior attorney for Environmental Defense, recently told the Associated Press. We believe she is only half right. When Cooper Lake started drying up last summer, water consumers in Dallas showed no concern because they never saw the lake. If the taps of consumers in the Dallas area had been turned off, they might have understood the seriousness of their overconsumption. But most didn’t know the source of the water coming out of their tap. A water Development Board survey found that only 28 percent of Texans know the source of their drinking water.

The problem is huge. A statewide water use study conducted in 2001 found that Texas will struggle to keep up with the water demand for the next 50 years as the population doubles to about 40 million. But the implications for rural Texas are even greater. If good water legislation is not enacted, rural Texas may find water sources depleted by big city consumers, where the population is growing fastest.

While we are not opposed to rural Texas contributing to the water needs of the entire state, we do not believe that metro areas should be allowed to suck up the available water nor confiscate thousands of acres for new lakes in rural areas to provide water for metropolitan consumption.

Good water legislation will put the focus on conservation. We believe that the only way the state can avoid spending billions to build reservoirs, displacing rural land dwellers, is for consumption to be curtailed. We are pleased that Sen. Robert Duncan, R-Lubbock, and Rep. Robert Puentes, D-San Antonio, have said they will push for \$15 million to fund a state public awareness campaign for water conservation.

We also oppose the sale of state water rights to private companies that would sell water to municipalities at inflated prices. Regulation must keep the state’s water resources out of the hands of private companies who seek to profit from the growing demand.

Sen. Frank Madla, D-San Antonio and chairman of the water committee, was right on target recently when he said, "We're at a crossroads. I think we have to get a handle on how we're going to regulate water in Texas."

Getting a handle on the state's water problems requires more than giving lip service to water legislation each session. Lawmakers must make water a priority and begin to find reasonable ways to require conservation.