

Draft 2007 State Water Plan wastes water, money

Water plan “a wildly expensive wish list that the legislature and the people of Texas should view with great skepticism.”

(AUSTIN, TX) The state water development board recently released a draft version of the 2007 state water plan. A coalition of conservation groups has criticized the plan, calling it “a 31-billion dollar boondoggle that, if implemented as written, could leave the state with dry rivers and empty pockets.”

The plan calls for the creation of 14 major new reservoirs and relies on unsustainable pumping of groundwater in many areas of the state. The water development board estimates that Texas’ population will double by 2060 and that total water demand will increase by twenty-seven percent.

Myron Hess of the National Wildlife Federation said of the plan, “While some regions did a good job, on the whole the draft 2007 State Water Plan is a squandered opportunity. Instead of focusing on cost-effective solutions with the least impact on our rivers and bays, we’ve ended up with a wildly expensive wish list that the legislature and the people of Texas should view with great skepticism.”

Hess said that while some regions did recommend strong water conservation, many of the regions did not adequately focus on using water more efficiently as a way to meet needs. None of the groups looked at how drought management could reduce non-essential water demands as a way to avoid expensive new water supply projects that would only be needed during drought periods. Each of the 16 regional water-planning groups was responsible for developing their regional plan which was incorporated into the draft state plan.

If fully implemented, the plan could have serious environmental impacts across the state. Excessive groundwater pumping could dry up springs and leave some communities high and dry, without options for the future. During dry periods, many rivers could be left without enough water in them to support fish and wildlife.

Texas’ seven major coastal bays could also be impacted. Bays, or estuaries, are where the state’s rivers flow into the Gulf of Mexico. These areas support amazing abundance of wildlife—fish, oysters, shrimp, blue crabs, and birds such as the endangered whooping crane. All of this abundance is reliant on an adequate amount of fresh water making it downstream from the rivers into the bay.

“If all the projects in the plan were built,” said Hess, “many of Texas’ estuary systems could face a serious decline in productivity.”

The conservation groups believe the state should create a plan that meets increased water needs with minimal damage to the environment—and to ratepayer’s wallets. And whether

it is through increased water rates or fees on bottled water or new tap fees, there is only one ultimate source of cash for these proposed big water projects: Texas residents.

Mary Kelly of Environmental Defense explains, “We have to prepare ourselves for droughts like the one we are in today and that means being innovative about how we use water. Letting water sit out in a lake to evaporate during a hot Texas summer isn’t a smart approach, especially as climate change could increase statewide temperatures. Using water efficiently is not just cheaper; it is also more reliable. This draft plan, unfortunately, is a 1950s-style solution to a 21st-century problem.”

The groups point to the Dallas-Fort Worth area portion of the plan as particularly problematic.

“The Dallas Fort-Worth section of the plan is a perfect storm of bad planning,” said Hess. “It fails to include serious water conservation measures and proposes four massive new reservoir projects at a cost of almost \$3.5 billion—even though enough water to meet all projected needs would be available without them.”

One of these projects, the proposed Marvin Nichols reservoir in North East Texas, is particularly contentious. It would flood 72,000 acres of farmland and bottomland hardwood forests. The regional water plan for North East Texas, where the dam would be located, recommends against building the reservoir, but the Texas Water Development Board chose to include the project in the statewide plan.

Jennifer Walker of the Lone Star chapter of the Sierra Club concluded, “We recognize that as Texas grows, some new supplies will be needed. The Water Development Board, water suppliers and the legislature should focus on a balanced set of water management strategies with an increased emphasis on water conservation—the most affordable and secure strategy for the future.”

A copy of the 2007 draft state water plan is available at <http://www.twdb.state.tx.us/home/index.asp>.