
LOWER COLORADO RIVER AUTHORITY
P.O. Box 220, Austin, TX 78767-0220
1-800-776-5272, FAX (512) 473-3557



LCRA BOARD CONSIDERS DROUGHT MANAGEMENT ACTIONS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Nov. 10, 2009

MEDIA CONTACT: Robert Cullick 1-800-776-5272, Ext. 4086, or Emlea Chanslor, Ext. 3342

AUSTIN – At a specially called meeting on Tuesday, Nov. 10, the LCRA Board discussed revised staff recommendations to manage the ongoing Colorado River Basin Drought and listened to public comment about the potential economic impact of reduced water supplies.

LCRA staff is recommending drought management actions in response to the serious drought that has, at times, been more intense than the worst drought this region has experienced, the Drought of Record that occurred from 1947 to 1957. On Nov. 10, the region’s water supply reservoirs were about 52 percent full. These reservoirs dropped to about 39 percent full before rains in September and October.

During a 20-month period of intense drought, the Highland Lakes accumulated an inflow deficit (the amount of water flowing into the Highland Lakes as compared to a similar period during the Drought of Record) of nearly 400,000 acre-feet by early September 2009. That deficit is less today, about 267,000 acre-feet, but has not been erased despite above-normal rainfall.

“The recent rains have not been enough to end this serious drought. We are hopeful that Mother Nature will send us more rain, but wishful thinking is not good water planning.” said Tom Mason, LCRA general manager.

Because of these unprecedented drought conditions and the potential for dry conditions to resume next year, LCRA staff is recommending additional drought management actions — four separate actions — to manage the drought in 2010. These recommendations have been revised to take into account the recent rains and feedback from stakeholders and customers and include the following:

- Allow some water for interruptible customers in 2010 for a first rice crop. Current estimates show that LCRA could provide at least 75 percent of what these customers may need, depending on water storage levels in the Highland Lakes early next year. LCRA would consider whether water could be provided for second crop at a later date. LCRA would follow provisions in its Water Management Plan, either the 1999 plan currently in effect, or the 2003 plan, which could be approved by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) in the coming weeks. A previous staff recommendation anticipated a more significant cutback in water for rice farmers may be needed. Recent rains have alleviated the need for such significant cutbacks.

- Seek temporary amendments from the TCEQ to optimize river water in the lower portion of the basin so it can be used for industrial, irrigation and municipal uses if dry conditions return and the water is not being used for agricultural customers.

- Temporarily suspend new contracts for water that, if granted, would increase demand on the firm water system. The suspension would cease when combined storage volume in lakes Buchanan and Travis increases to 1.4 million acre-feet. LCRA’s general manager could lift the suspension sooner if water storage conditions recover the deficit of the past two years.

·Continue to encourage customers to conserve water. At this time, conditions have improved such that firm water customers, which include cities and industries, may lift their mandatory watering restrictions with little risk of significant impact on water supply over the next six months. Staff will continue working with customers on pro-rata curtailment procedures to be prepared for use if the drought worsens.

As steward of the lower Colorado River, LCRA manages water supply for a diverse set of customers, including water providers that supply drinking water to more than 1.1 million Central Texans, industries such as power plants, and about 350 farmers. At the specially called Board meeting, the LCRA Board heard public input from individuals who represent these diverse customers.

“LCRA has a responsibility to use the best information we have to develop plans for managing the drought into next year,” Mason said. “We have engaged our water planning experts to develop various options and have discussed them since September with the many stakeholders and customers that we serve.”

Many customers and representatives of related interests raised issues that they wanted the LCRA Board to consider:

- Austin Mayor Lee Leffingwell asked LCRA to ensure that the City of Austin, which paid LCRA \$100 million for a long-term water supply, has the water it contracted for.
- Irrigation customers asked LCRA to ensure water for the first crop of rice in Colorado, Wharton and Matagorda counties in the basin’s coastal region.
- Some firm water customers said if firm water sales are suspended while interruptible sales are continued, LCRA will send a message that rice irrigation is more important than municipal use.
- Rice farmers have invested heavily in conservation measures, but no vehicle exists to enable farmers to benefit from these savings.
- Wholesale water providers have implemented conservation measures at LCRA’s request. The lower water usage also has curtailed revenues, placing constraints on their operations.
- Some local and environmental interests supported suspension of new water contracts, while one water provider expressed concern about how it would affect his efforts to obtain additional water for his community.

The LCRA Board is expected to consider action on the drought management recommendations at its regularly scheduled meeting Nov. 18.