

Protecting a precious resource: Good to the last drop?

Lawmakers look at state water woes

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SAN ANTONIO - Last year State Comptroller Susan Combs urged lawmakers to take action to avoid a major water shortage in the wake of two decades of explosive population growth.

"Given Texas' growing population, the development and protection of our water resources is one of the most pressing long-term issues facing lawmakers," Combs wrote in the conclusion of her 72-page report. "Ensuring clean and dependable water supplies will be essential to protect the health of Texas citizens and the strength of the state's economy."

Legislators are heeding her warning.

Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, the presiding officer of the Texas Senate, has said that in the 2011 session water will be a legislative priority.

"With our population expected to double in the next 30 years, safe, reliable water resources are critical to the health and quality of life of our citizens as well as business and industry," Dewhurst said in December while issuing a series of water policy recommendations to the Senate Natural Resources Committee.

Any legislation could heavily impact how groundwater from the Ogallala Aquifer is regulated.

State Rep. John Smithee, R-Amarillo, a member of the House Natural Resources Committee, said he is pleased the Legislature is making water a priority. Smithee said he believes conservation is critical in meeting the state's future demand.

"We are basically talking about creating new water," Smithee said. "That's the way to create water - saving it."

But Lubbock Mayor Tom Martin warns that major water legislation could be a double-edge sword for West Texas.

"A considerable amount of our water is groundwater and I know there are a lot of efforts to regulate it which are very counterproductive because most of our water is not renewable like in Central Texas and other regions of the state," Martin said. "Our groundwater districts already limit the amount of pumping to preserve what we've got for another 50 to 100 years and the thinking in Austin is to have a solution that fits all."

Fortunately for West Texas, Smithee is a member of the House Natural Resources Committee and Sens. Robert Duncan, R-Lubbock, and Kel Seliger, R-Amarillo, sit on the Senate Natural Resources Committee, Martin said.

"I hope they stay in those committees because we need them," he said.

Seliger said he agrees with Martin to a certain extent.

"We have to be very, very careful to make sure that the law that we pass has to do with groundwater doesn't do something to our river water that is a bad policy," Seliger said.

"We have different conservation requirements for groundwater," Seliger added. "You take areas like the Edwards Aquifer (in the Austin-San Antonio area) which is just endlessly renewable ... that is a different challenge than in the Ogallala which for all practical purposes is not rechargeable."

Water experts and public officials across the state said educating the public about the importance of water conservation will play a critical role.

"We think the future is education, to educate the public about the importance of water conservation," Ed Archuleta, manager of the El Paso Water Utilities Public Service Board, told the House panel.

In El Paso, one of the driest communities in the nation because it is in a desert area, the city has had strict water restrictions since 1991 and though at first there was a public uproar, people are now cooperating, Archuleta said.

The result? "We used to be about 230 gallons per family, now we're about 135" a day, he said. The daily average includes water consumption by businesses and industry.

The water restriction is part of a 50-year plan the city developed in 1990, Archuleta said. Without a long-range plan it is highly unlikely that a community could succeed in cutting down on its consumption.

"A lot of times communities go into conservation without having a clear objective," he said. "You've got to have an objective."

Then there is water desalinization that Archuleta and others said also will play a critical role in ensuring that Texas meets its future demand.

Desalinization is not just for ocean water but for rivers and other sources where water is too salty for human consumption, various experts told the House panel. Another possibility discussed, though not as much so far, is rainwater harvesting techniques.

Other water proposals lawmakers are expected to address during next year's session include groundwater use, building more dams and water allocation.

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