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Hill Country Alliance Urges Texas Water Development Board to Make Conservation Priority in Funding State Water Projects

by Vicki Wolf
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In November 2013, Texas voters passed Proposition 6 to redirect $2 billion from the Texas "Rainy Day Fund" to help finance state water plan projects. The fund set up for these projects is called SWIFT -- State Water Implementation Fund for Texas. The Texas Water Development Board (TWDB) soon will announce draft rules and priorities for how these funds will be spent. In advance of that announcement, the Hill Country Alliance (HCA) convened a roundtable discussion in Blanco on June 4th where HCA board, advisory team and other water and land stewardship experts discussed a range of solutions that could save money and provide water to see the state through future severe droughts.

TWDB staff members Cameron Turner, Agriculture Conservation Program representative, and Doug Shaw, rural ombudsman, attended the meeting to listen and offer ideas and feedback. They are visiting Texas communities and providing a link between citizen groups and the SWIFT process. "We encourage folks to get involved in local regional water planning processes. This isn't a one-time thing, people must get engaged and stay engaged as new plans are developed every 5 years," commented Turner.

Most of the solutions offered during the HCA roundtable discussion are low-cost to implement, and many come with ecological benefits. Some would cost nothing.

Some solutions involve realizing the connection between the water and the land as well as the connection between groundwater and surface water. **The state needs water policy that protects long-term spring flow that will nurture natural water systems and enhance long-term supply.**

"There's an overlooked opportunity for water management and supply, and that is storing water on the land through better riparian function," said Sky Lewey, Nueces River Authority adviser, rancher and HCA board member. As an example, she showed two photos of Burro Creek- one of a barren, rocky stream bed with only sparse, seasonal flow. A second photo taken only 20 years later shows a fully functioning creek with perennial flow flanked by a green landscape with lush habitat. "The big change was that the riparian area recovered," primarily as a result of better grazing management in and around the stream. "They're still grazing sheep on Burro Creek, but in a different way," Lewey said. If large portions of Texas were managed with water catchment in mind, rainfall could be slowed in the landscape, bringing water tables up and better connecting our streams with groundwater resources.

"Water comes from the land, so the way the land is managed determines the quantity of water and the timing of that water -- whether it comes down in a big gush and it's gone, or whether it's more sustained," said Steve Nelle, retired Natural Resource Conservation Service, land conservation/range management specialist. For good land and water management, it is essential to keep a cover on the land that can be any combination of native grasses, trees and brush. When the soil underneath cover stays healthy with good organic matter, then the land holds water.

In Texas towns and cities, at the top of the list for saving water is a change in urban landscaping. "We estimate up to seventy percent of drinking water is applied to urban landscaping in some communities," said Bill Neiman, Native American Seed rancher and HCA board member. Exotic grasses commonly seen in the urban landscape such as St. Augustine are native to the Caribbean and require much greater rainfall than what we receive in Texas. Neiman's 26-year-old son, Weston, told the roundtable participants that **stopping lawn watering in the Hill Country could save billions of gallons of water each month.**

Karen Ford, WaterPR and HCA board member, explained that **making use of rainwater harvesting will reduce demand and also change the way people think about daily water use.** Ford described a "new water ethic" that calls on citizens to treat water as a precious resource. A 2004 survey found that only 28 percent of Texans definitely know the natural source of their drinking water. "Let's raise the water IQ in Texas," Ford said. "It's going to be really vital for our citizens to know where their water comes from and how much they use."

Roundtable participants suggested that funding be made available for incentives and education to facilitate sustainable practices. They also recommended that projects that emphasize conservation and education be given a higher priority for funding.

It is critical to focus on solutions for meeting real "need" rather than perceived "demand" based on a "business as usual" formula. By adjusting TWDB assumptions of water usage to include drought restrictions, conservation and efficiency improvements, you begin to see more realistic targets. "If you want to take conservation seriously, get more in line with sustainable growth and more effective use of existing supplies," said Joe Trungale, PE, hydrologist and co-author of "Learning from Drought: Next Generation Water Planning."

In concluding remarks, Tyson Broad, Lone Star Chapter, Sierra Club research associate, reminded participants that **conservation is the cheapest option for water management.** While conservation costs about $300/acre foot, infrastructure projects such as building new reservoirs or constructing desalination plants could cost anywhere from $1,000 to more than $2,000/acre foot.

While so many of the solutions discussed during the roundtable meeting would provide immediate benefit in terms of water availability with little cost, they rely on changes in the behavior of water users throughout the state. “What is truly necessary is for people to start changing their water use behavior, and that is a real challenge,” said Christy Muse, HCA executive director. “Unfortunately there is currently not a good vehicle or emphasis in the SWIFT process for programs that actually do change human behavior.”

Steve Nelle said it best when he quoted Dr. John Walker, Range Ecologist, **“Unfortunately, engineering/mechanical solutions usually trump ecological solutions because the former do not require people to change their behavior.”** Unless the SWIFT implements innovative ways of incentivizing behavior changes in end-users, we could see ‘business as usual’ with big infrastructure projects that don’t address the low-hanging fruit of conservation.

Vicki Wolf writes for the Hill Country Alliance, a nonprofit organization whose purpose is to raise public awareness and build community support around the need to preserve the natural resources and heritage of the Central Texas Hill Country. www.hillcountryalliance.org

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Photo:
From left - Chris Hale, Cameron Turner, Doug Shaw, Weston Neiman and Bill Neiman