

The LCRA/SAWS Water Project Explained; Parts Three Through Five

Part 3 Of 5

Off-Channel Reservoirs

This is the third in a series of five articles by Ron Gertson on the plan by the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) and San Antonio Water System (SAWS) to meet water needs in the region and to provide water to San Antonio in the future.

LCRA's unveiling of potential off-channel reservoir sites in Matagorda, Wharton and Colorado Counties focused public attention on the LCRA-SAWS Water Project (LSWP).

The losing of land to reservoir construction has stirred up justifiable emotions and led to letter-writing that is sometimes long on emotion and short on facts.

The LSWP calls for the capture of unused river flows in off-channel reservoirs. Gulf coast area rainfall causes a great deal of water to enter the Colorado River below the highland lakes. This water can only be utilized if new storage capacity is created for it.

Flat topography and environmental concerns make on-channel dams like Buchanan and Mansfield an impossibility in coastal area counties.

The alternative is off-channel storage. Off-channel reservoir(s) preliminarily envisioned in the LSWP would have levees up to 35 ft. encircling them while covering 10,000 acres of land in total. They would be filled by high-volume pumping stations at the river that would transport water into the reservoir(s) via pipelines as large as 12 feet in diameter.

The reservoirs would be located near the source of water rather than nearer to San Antonio. This is due to the cost-prohibitive component sizing that would be required to transfer huge volumes of water a great distance in a short period of time.

Typical high-flow events on the lower Colorado can pass in three to ten days. The quick capture of these short-duration high flow events must be maximized for the project to be feasible.

The off-channel reservoirs will not be available for recreation due to highly fluctuating water levels and tremendous water volumes at inlet and outlet locations.

Concern has been expressed about the loss of tax revenue from the 10,000 acres included in the reservoirs. The LCRA has promised to keep county governments whole with regard to potential losses in tax revenue.

Additionally this loss of tax base should be compared to the loss of tax base that would occur if the LSWP does not occur. Potentially over 100,000 acres of land could lose 70 percent or more of its taxable value if it was no longer able to be irrigated due to lack of reliable water.

According to LCRA General Manager Joe Beal a number of landowners have indicated a willingness to enter negotiations for

the sale of land for this purpose. The LCRA Board has committed to acquiring the needed land from willing sellers to the maximum extent possible.

Over 70 years ago a local stakeholder group of concerned citizens successfully worked to get the Colorado River tamed to provide flood control and reliable irrigation water for the lower counties. That effort resulted in the creation of the invaluable highland lakes system.

When Lakes Buchanan and Travis were constructed some 50,000 acres of land was required. According to Mr. Beal only fourteen small parcels of these 50,000 acres had to be acquired through condemnation.

We can be thankful today that our forefathers had the courage to do what needed to be done. Who among us would return to the destruction and havoc of the Colorado River as it was prior to the dams?

Today we are in a situation similar to our forefathers. This time, though, the land in question belongs to neighbors and friends not upstream landowners. Do we have the courage to do what is best for future generations?

Will folks look back with pride on the wise local leadership of this current generation? Only time will tell.

There is much to be learned before we can hope to discern what the wise course is.

Let's keep studying and learn what must be learned to make that wise, informed choice.

The next article will discuss the groundwater component of the LSWP.

Part 4 of 5

The LSWP, Groundwater

This is the fourth in a series of five articles by Ron Gertson on the plan by the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) and San Antonio Water System (SAWS) to meet water needs in the region and to provide water to San Antonio in the future.

The groundwater element of the LCRA-SAWS Water Project (LSWP) has drawn considerable fire. Individuals desiring to kill the project have repeatedly mischaracterized the plans for groundwater.

The irrigation districts in these three lower counties rely heavily on interruptible stored surface water, and this water's reliability will decrease as upstream municipalities grow into water supplies for which they have already contracted with the LCRA.

Without the LSWP, the unreliability of irrigation water could cause farmers to drill their own irrigation wells and no longer use the unreliable district water.

As farmers choose to convert to groundwater the districts will be forced to cease operations due to negative cash flow. All remaining irrigators would have to rely entirely on groundwater.

The groundwater pumping called for in the LSWP must be properly weighed against the potential for the "no LSWP" scenario to lead to a 100 percent reliance on groundwater for irrigators.

If all irrigators currently using LCRA surface water were to entirely convert to groundwater our aquifer would see a staggering increase in pumpage of up to 400,000 ac-ft per year.

By contrast, the LSWP would develop a limited amount of groundwater to maintain the reliability water from the LCRA irrigation districts and thereby prevent the necessity of turning to complete reliance upon groundwater.

The irrigation districts would maximize the use of available surface water and use groundwater only as a supplement when surface water is insufficient.

HB 1629 and the LSWP Definitive Agreement prohibit the sale of groundwater to SAWS. The agreement limits groundwater utilization to a project life annual average of 36,000 acre-feet; a ten year rolling annual average of 62,000 acre-feet; and a single year maximum of 95,000 acre-feet over the three-county irrigation area.

These numbers were set by Region K based on the results of localized water models used to simulate potential drawdowns.

An extensive, multi-county groundwater model is being developed as a part of the LSWP studies. The new model should provide more definitive answers about the impact of such pumping.

The groundwater conservation districts (GCDs) for Wharton and Matagorda Counties are actively engaged in the groundwater model development process and are poised to react to potential negative impacts.

The LCRA has committed to working within the requirements of the GCDs.

Much has been made of the fact that preliminary plans call for the LCRA to utilize up to 70 irrigation wells in the irrigation districts. This number of wells could produce far more water than is needed.

However, the large number is being considered as a means of spreading the pumping over a larger area, thereby reducing localized impacts and enabling natural recharge to keep up with withdrawals.

To further minimize fears that the LCRA is a hidden agenda for the groundwater, LCRA General Manager Joe Beal has stated that LCRA desires to acquire the water from existing wells through lease arrangements to the maximum extent possible.

The cost associated with this supplemental groundwater is to be born by SAWS, not LCRA or its irrigation customers.

Additionally Mr. Beal has committed to seeing that local cities, businesses and individuals will not be negatively impacted by this groundwater development.

There are still more questions than answers at this time, but hopefully the above material at least demonstrates the boundaries within which the project must operate.

The groundwater studies currently under way should help us determine whether these boundaries are sufficient.

In the next and last article in this series I will discuss the conservation components of the LSWP.

PART 5 OF 5 Irrigation Water Conservation

This is the fifth in a series of five articles by Ron Gertson on the plan by the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) and San Antonio Water System (SAWS) to meet water needs in the region and to provide water to San Antonio in the future.

Conservation of area irrigation water is key to the success of the LCRA/SAWS Water Project (LSWP). Such conservation has been projected to free up as much as 118,000 acre-feet of water, part of which could be used to help meet growing San Antonio demands.

The Region K Water Planning Group identified the following potential conservation measures:

--Precision leveling of rice fields.

--Multiple inlet delivery systems along rice fields.

--Automation of canal delivery structures.

--Small regulating reservoirs within the irrigation systems.

--Lining of canals in highly permeable areas.

--Development of rice varieties that would result in the use of less water.

These measures are currently being evaluated in the LSWP studies. If the LSWP is implemented then SAWS will fund these measures as a condition of the project.

Precision leveling uses laser-controlled dirt movers to shape the land to either zero slope or a consistent slight slope while sometimes installing permanent levees. This increases the ability to micro-manage water depths and better utilize rainfall.

Multiple inlet systems complement precision leveling by providing a water delivery structure for each 25-acre segment of a field. This enables more precise delivery of water to each section of the field.

Automated canal structures will minimize loss of water that results from manual manipulation of the canal structures. Canal coordinators manually adjust hundreds of structures daily to deliver intended amounts of water to the right places.

This ultimately results in "management" losses necessary just to keep water flowing to all sections of the canal. Automation of key structures and electronic monitoring water levels makes more precise water delivery possible.

Regulating reservoirs within the canal systems placed at strategic locations would also help to

minimize management losses by capturing those losses in small 25 to 100 acre reservoirs for later re-introduction to the system.

Large rainfall events trigger farmers to order all of their water turned off. Canal delivery pumps are then turned off, but a large amount of water already in the system leaks out over time and the system loses its charge. Regulating reservoirs would help to preserve this charge for re-use.

Canal lining is a very expensive way of achieving conservation. The soil in the largest portion of the irrigation districts provides excellent water holding capacity.

It is thought, though, that there are short canals that may be losing enough water to warrant lining. The cost of most canal lining methods approaches one million dollars per mile, so it is unlikely that extensive canal lining will be undertaken for this project.

Water-conserving rice varieties may prove to be the most cost effective way of achieving conser-

vation. The concept is to develop varieties that produce more rice by increasing the length of the growing season and eliminating second crop.

The longer growing season would reduce or eliminate the potential for a second crop thereby reducing water use. The goal is to produce with one crop what now takes two crops.

The LCRA and the Texas Agricultural Extension Service at Beaumont are cooperating to make this a reality.

This concludes the LSWP series I set out to provide. The LSWP offers great potential for gain in our lower counties, but at what cost?

Let's stay tuned in to the study process so we will be able to offer informed direction to the various appointed and elected officials who will determine the project's fate.

For additional information please visit the LSWP website at www.lcra.org/lswp.

Oral and Overall Health Linked

Many adults, especially between the ages of 45 to 64, fail to recognize that their oral health holds valuable clues that can affect their overall health. Members of this age group too often may not take the time to seek expert dental advice, especially if they are not in pain, although they are particularly vulnerable to developing Type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis and heart disease. Regular oral exams can spot some diseases at their earliest stages, when they are most treatable.

All adults should be aware of any changes in the mouth area, such as lumps, bumps, sore spots, bleeding mouth and dry mouth, as well as any changes to the appearance of the gums, tongue, throat, insides of cheeks and the roof of the mouth. All can provide early warning signs of several diseases. Consult with your dentist if you have any questions about your oral health.

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Cattle On Feed Up Four Percent

Cattle and calves on feed for slaughter market in Texas feedlots with capacity of 1,000 head or more totaled 2.93 million head on Oct. 1, up four percent from a year ago.

According to the monthly report released by the Texas Field Office, the estimate was down one percent from the Sept. 1 level.

Producers placed 495,000 head in commercial feedlots during September, down 10 percent from a year ago and down 13 percent from the August 2006 total.

Texas commercial feeders marketed 510,000 head during September, unchanged from last year but down 11 percent from the previous month.

On Oct. 1, there were 2.45 million head of cattle and calves on feeding the Northern High Plains, 84 percent of the state's total.

The number on feed across the area was up four percent from last year, but down one percent from the September total.

September placements in the Northern High Plains totaled 425,000 head, down 12 percent from the August total.

Marketings were down 11 percent from last month to 440,000 head.

Cattle and calves on feed for slaughter market in the United States in feedlots with a capacity of 1,000 head or more totaled 11.4 million head on Oct. 1, 2005. This inventory was nine percent above Oct. 1, 2005.

Placements in feedlots during September totaled 2.23 million head, five percent below September 2005.

September placements of cattle and calves weighing less than 600 pounds totaled 725,000 head; 600-699 pounds totaled 412,000 head; 700-799 pounds totaled 450,000 head; 800 pounds and greater totaled 645,000 head.

Marketings of fed cattle during September totaled 1.77 million head, three percent below 2005.

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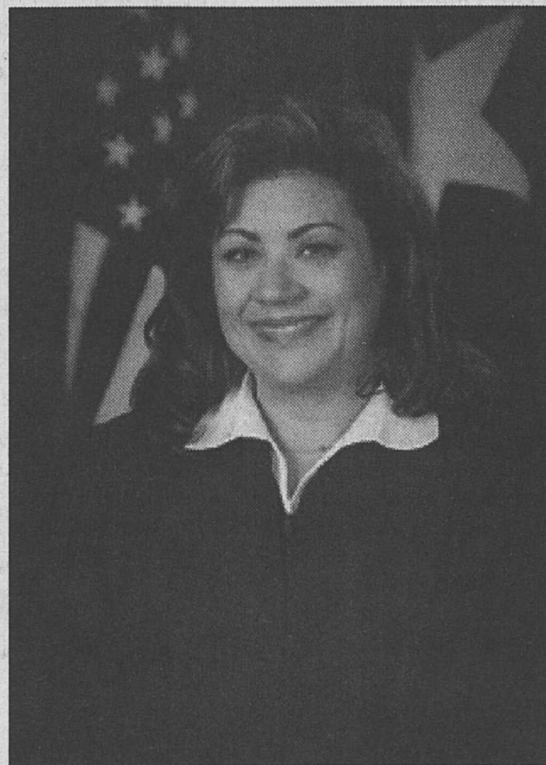
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