CENTRAL TEXAS WATER COALITION

May 19, 2014
Via E-mail to: phil.wilson@lcra.org
Mr. Phil Wilson, General Manager
Lower Colorado River Authority
P.O. Box 2020
Austin, Texas 787

Re: Central Texas Water Coalition Comments Regarding DWDR Cancellation Trigger

Dear Mr. Wilson:

As you are well aware, the declaration of a drought worse than the drought of record (DWDR) appears to be imminent. At this juncture, the LCRA must make critical decisions, including what conditions will result in the cancellation of the DWDR declaration. The Central Texas Water Coalition (CTWC) urges the LCRA Board to apply lessons learned during this severe, extended drought to ensure that the DWDR is not lifted prematurely. The security of firm drinking water supplies for over a million Central Texans depends upon it.

A DWDR Appears Imminent

Under the LCRA's Water Management Plan (WMP), the LCRA Board will declare a DWDR when the following three conditions are simultaneously met:
(1) it has been at least 24 months since both Lakes Buchanan and Travis were at maximum allowable conservation storage levels;
(2) the cumulative inflow deficit since the beginning of the drought exceeds the envelope curve for cumulate inflow deficits by at least 5% for six consecutive months; and
(3) the combined storage in Lakes Buchanan and Travis is less than 600,000 acre-feet.
See WMP at p. 4-34.

As of the date of this letter, criteria (1) and (2) have been met and the combined storage in Lakes Buchanan and Travis stands at 715,091 acre-feet (36 percent full). According to LCRA's own expert, Ron Anderson, the final criterion could be met within weeks. *See* Application of the Lower Colorado River Authority for Extension to Emergency Authorization, Supplemental Affidavit of Ron Anderson (May 2, 2014).

While under a DWDR declaration, firm water customers are subject to a mandatory pro rata curtailment of at least twenty percent. Further, all uses of interruptible stored water will be totally cut off prior to and during any mandatory pro rata curtailment of stored water supplies. WMP at p. 4-32.

Currently, in order to cancel a declaration of a DWDR, only *one* of the following conditions must be met:

(1) the cumulative inflow deficit since the beginning of the drought is less than the envelope curve for cumulative inflow deficits by at least 5% for six consecutive months; *or*
(2) the combined storage in Lakes Buchanan and Travis is greater than 1.4 million acre-feet of water. WMP at p. 4-34.

The Board Must Make Decisions Soon Regarding Criteria for Cancellation of a DWDR

Prior to the declaration of a DWDR, the WMP requires the LCRA Board to re-evaluate the 1.4 million acre-foot threshold level "to determine if a more accurate conservation storage level in lieu of 1.4 million acre-feet can be determined." *Id.* With a DWDR imminent, the time for this analysis is now.

Modeling Based on Recent Data and Drought Lessons Learned Indicate that the Combined Storage Level Criterion Should Be 1.7 MAF

CTWC urges the LCRA Board to revise the combined storage level criterion so that the DWDR declaration is not lifted until the combined storage in Lakes Travis and Buchanan reaches at least 1.7 million acre-feet. The TCEQ Executive Director's staff performed an analysis based on a Water Availability Model (WAM) updated through 2013. This analysis indicated "that the combined storage level would also need reach *at least* 1.7 MAF prior to shifting" out of the extraordinary drought curtailment curve that would cut off releases for interruptible use under our current conditions. Draft Naturalized Streamflow Updates and Modeling Report, Colorado River Basin, p. 12 (May 16, 2014)(emphasis added)("ED's Modeling Report"). This analysis is based on data updated through 2013 -- much more complete data than used to develop the current WMP level of 1.4 million acre-feet.

The 1.4 million acre-foot criterion was thought to be satisfactory at a time when we were blissfully unaware of the extended, severe drought that lay ahead of us. Like other trigger levels within the current, outdated WMP, this level is inadequate to protect firm water supplies in the face of extraordinary drought. With the added benefit of the knowledge we have gained over the past three years and in light of the most recent data, such as the lowest-ever-recorded inflows for the first four months of the year, we now know that this trigger level, like the others, must be increased.

Better data leads to better decisions. In recognition of this, the WMP requires the LCRA "to determine if a more accurate conservation storage level in lieu of 1.4 million acre-feet can be determined" at this time. It can, and it has. Modeling reflecting the current extraordinary drought determined that 1.7 million acre-feet is a more accurate conservation storage level.

If the Inflow Criterion Could Possibly Result in Cancellation of the DWDR Prior to Reaching the Combined Storage Level Criterion, LCRA Should Seek Emergency Relief

A DWDR may also be canceled if the cumulative inflow deficit since the beginning of the drought is less than the envelope curve for cumulative inflow deficits by at least 5% for six consecutive months. If there is any way this criterion could be interpreted to allow the DWDR to be canceled prior to Lakes Buchanan and Travis reaching the combined storage level trigger, LCRA should seek emergency relief from this provision of the WMP from the TCEQ to ensure that does not occur. This emergency relief should request that the LCRA be allowed to deviate from the current WMP and instead require that both the combined storage and inflow criteria be met prior to lifting a DWDR declaration.

Again, LCRA must apply the knowledge it has gained during this drought. Inflows can slow to almost nothing at any time and can stay low for extended periods of time, as shown over the past several months. Further, the Texas State Climatologist has opined that we could remain in a drought for another 10-15 years, even though the area may experience periods of high rainfall such as an El Niño period. A short period of increased inflows in the midst of an unprecedented drought is no substitute for adequate recovery in storage. In fact, both storage and inflow measures are critical to determining when it is safe to begin releasing stored water again. In addition to showing that a storage level of 1.7 million acre-feet is necessary to protect firm drinking water supplies in this extraordinary drought, the proposed WMP outlined in the ED's Modeling Report would require that both the combined storage level criterion and the "Drought Intensity Criteria" -- which are based on inflow measurements -- be met prior to moving to a less-stringent management regime designed for less-severe drought or normal conditions. CTWC urges the LCRA to take the steps necessary to ensure that both storage and inflow criteria are met prior to lifting a declaration of a DWDR.

Conclusion

In sum, since the development of the WMP criteria for cancellation of a DWDR, experience has shown us that drought can be much worse than we expected and that periods of increased inflows and minimal increases in combined storage do not necessarily indicate adequate recovery to start releasing stored water again. The Executive Director's modeling has demonstrated that recovery to 1.7 million acre-feet is necessary to provide a reasonable level of assurance that firm water commitments can be met in coming years, as required by LCRA water rights. Additionally, because inflow amounts are critical to evaluating drought status, LCRA should only lift a declaration of a DWDR if both the combined storage and inflow criteria are met, not just one or the other. Above all, until the new WMP is adopted, LCRA must ensure that it does not under any circumstances revert to operating under the 2010 WMP as it has been proven wholly inadequate to protect firm drinking water supplies during severe drought. CTWC appreciates your consideration of these comments.

Sincerely,

Jo Karr Tedder

Jo Karr Tedder
President, Central Texas Water Coalition

Cc: LCRA Board Members