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WE SAY LOWER COLORADO RIVER AUTHORITY

Change thinking, policies on water

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BY EDITORIAL BOARD

Lake Travis and Lake Buchanan, the Central Texas reservoirs that primarily supply the region's water, are 36 percent full. This month's rains have raised their levels slightly, but barring additional, significant rains, the lakes are headed toward a historic low by summer's end.

The Lower Colorado River Authority expects the lakes to fall below 30 percent of capacity during the next several weeks. That mark will make the current drought the worst on record — worse than the 1947-57 drought that is the stuff of Texas legend.

The lakes are experiencing conditions that have never before been seen. But they are conditions that possibly could become commonplace over the next few decades. It's important for the LCRA and its water customers to adjust to a future where water can no longer be taken for granted. Policies should change to embrace conservation, and the cost of water should more accurately reflect its value.

To the LCRA, the drought is everything. "We're having record-low inflows, and when you have that ... it shapes everything else," LCRA General Manager Becky Motal told us last week.

Historically, 717,162 acre-feet of water flows into the lakes during the first six months of the year, according to LCRA records. This year, 81,194 acre-feet flowed into the lakes from January through June.

To the LCRA's critics, however, the unprecedented condition of the lakes, where in some areas brush grows across stretches once filled with water, is a result of the lake authority's mismanagement as much as it is of drought.

And key to that mismanagement is the LCRA's generosity with downstream rice farmers.

Greg Meszaros, director of the Austin Water Utility, told the American-Statesman's Marty Toohey in a story published Sunday that the LCRA failed to approach the drought "like it could be a multiyear drought. Now the decisions made in '08, '09, '10, '11, they're coming home to roost."

Those decisions included releases of water to coastal rice farmers. Particularly odious to the LCRA's upstream customers was the agency's decision to allow two water releases to farmers in 2011. Toohey reported that Austin water officials estimate Lakes Buchanan and Travis would be 45 percent to 55 percent full if the LCRA had cut off the releases to rice farmers in 2011, when the farmers received more lake water than Austin did over 15 years.

The LCRA's decision to allow a release of water to the rice farmers in 2011 was questionable, and its decision to allow a second release was indefensible. The agency did not release water to the farmers in 2012 or again this year.

Managing the Highland Lakes and the extensive Colorado River basin while balancing the region's varied municipal, agricultural and recreational interests and contracts is a complicated task. The dams that created the Highland Lakes put the Colorado River in an unnatural state and interrupted its flow to the Gulf of Mexico. The LCRA can cut off the water needed by rice farmers, but it is obligated to continue the river's downstream flow to protect the health of the river and its downstream ecological systems.

The generation of Texans that built the dams in the 1930s and 1940s to control flooding along the Colorado River couldn't have foreseen the region's population growth or the predicted change in climate toward hotter, drier decades to come. A new water management plan is pending. As we've written previously, we support the LCRA's efforts to develop projects downstream to reduce the amount of water needed for agriculture from Lakes Travis and Buchanan.

When the lakes hit the 30 percent mark, communities that rely on them for their water will be required to cut their water use by 20 percent. Thanks to the conservation measures it already has adopted, Austin is in relatively good shape, though the city would further tighten its watering restrictions. Nature quickly can replenish what it has depleted. A well-aimed tropical storm — the stuff of Central Texans' dreams — could dump a day or two of heavy rain and fill up the lakes quickly. But it would be a mistake to think of the lakes as full should such an event occur. Instead, lake levels are always falling, and it's their fall we must learn to accept and better manage.