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TEXAS IN DROUGHT: CENTRAL TEXAS WATER SUPPLY

With Central Texas water near all-time lows, LCRA under fire

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BY MARTY TOOHEY - AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

http://www.mystatesman.com/news/news/with-central-texas-water-near-all-time-lows-lcra-u/nYx7N/?icmp=statesman_internallink_email_jul2013_Drought-Sweep-Email

TOW — There used to be a lake here.

Most of the time, before the drought set in, gently rolling waters would be flowing beneath Doug Scott's fishing pier on the northwest bank of Lake Buchanan. During high-water times, a narrow inlet winds around his pier and up into his property past the front porches of the five bungalows of Scott's small resort, Pelican Point.

Now the inlet is a gulch. From Scott's pier, there is no water to be seen, only an expanse of scrubby green and brown. Before last week's rains — which restored a trickle of flow through the lake bed that public officials don't expect to last — someone willing to slog through a stretch of mud could walk from his front porch to the opposite bank without splashing through a puddle. The grass is high enough that residents have hacked trails through it around clusters of willows as tall as 15 feet.

"This all grew since the lake dropped," said Scott, 71, steering his cherry-red Polaris Ranger cart down one of the trails. "I first saw this lake in '59, and I don't remember ever seeing it this bad."

Many residents along Buchanan and its sister Highland Lakes blame the Lower Colorado River Authority, the quasi-governmental body that manages the river along a 600-mile run ending at the Gulf of Mexico. A headline in a recent edition of the Burnet Bulletin asks: "Did drought or the LCRA get us here?" Austin's top water official raises the same question, one that LCRA executives say boils complex circumstances down to a too-easy dichotomy.

Buchanan is the northernmost of the six-lake chain of dammed waterways, which were built in the 1930s to prevent flooding along the Lower Colorado River before it hits Austin. Buchanan also serves another purpose: It stores water for much of Central Texas, along with its companion reservoir, Lake Travis. Because those two lakes were constructed to rise when water is flowing into the Colorado and shrink when it is not, drought tends to give them a desiccated look.

But if Lake Travis is startlingly low to Austin-area residents, the north end of Lake Buchanan is even more jarring. That is the shallow end, considered full at a little more than 30 feet deep; when the lake is low, it's the north end that dries up first. The lake has been lower at a few points, including two years ago, but it has never been this low this at the beginning of summer — and, residents say, the southward flow of water channeled through the lakes has never stopped completely.

“For the lake to be empty for two, maybe three years, is incredible,” said Wiley Balkum, who lives two lots south of Scott’s resort. “The Colorado River has always sustained itself, even in severe drought. Now it’s stopped flowing. For the first time — and I’ve been coming here for 50 years or so — the river has completely dried up.”

Approaching the worst

LCRA managers are quite clear on the situation: The lakes are in this state because of a complicated set of factors that can ultimately be traced back to a drought approaching the worst on record.

“Ultimately, weather catches up to you,” LCRA General Manager Becky Motal told the American-Statesman editorial board last week. “We’re having record-low inflows, and when you have that ... it shapes everything else.”

Since the drought set in during spring 2008, the lakes have dropped from

full to only 36 percent full. On Travis, the Sometimes Islands, which begin poking up above the water when the lakes are about 70 percent full, have been a constant feature. The shores of Windy Point now span much of the lake's width.

Even with last week's rains, the amount of water flowing into the lakes is historically low, according to the LCRA. The organization expects the lakes to drop below 30 percent full in September — and when that happens, Central Texas will officially be in the worst drought on record, surpassing the one that gripped the region from 1947 to 1957 and caused an estimated \$22 billion in agricultural and other economic losses, measured in today's dollars.

The region has already hit two of the three marks the LCRA uses to determine the worst drought on record. Travis and Buchanan are well past two years between being full, and less water is flowing into them than during the drought of record. The third mark is the lakes dropping to a point just below 30 percent of capacity.

“We're not there yet,” Motal said, “but we're getting close to the '50s level.”

At that point, communities relying on Highland Lakes water that haven't been cutting back their water consumption will be required to reduce it by 20 percent.

Austin appears to be in relatively good shape. Its conservation efforts mean the city has nearly met the requirement, Motal said. But Austin, being the largest city in the region, still plans to reduce lawn watering. Most properties will be limited to watering once a week, in either the morning or the evening, but not both.

With the population swelling even as LCRA climate models predict a

hotter, drier region, water will probably become an increasingly precious commodity, Motal said.

“The drought may be the window into the future,” she said. The LCRA is planning a \$200 million downstream reservoir in Wharton County and considering two smaller reservoirs, among other long-term measures. But, Motal said, “If you’ve got 2 million people (in Central Texas), what does it mean?”

A point of debate is what it will mean for the 200 or so rice farmers along the Gulf Coast who rely on LCRA water to grow their crop. Many upstream interests contend it isn’t primarily the weather but the farmers — or, more precisely, the LCRA’s decisions to keep supplying those farmers with relatively cheap water — that put Central Texas in the situation it is now facing.

“They didn’t really approach this like it could be a multiyear drought,” said Greg Meszaros, director of the Austin Water Utility. “Now the decisions made in ’08, ’09, ’10, ’11, they’re coming home to roost.”

Upstream, downstream

Those decisions are rooted partly in long-standing arrangements struck when the dams were built in the 1930s and 1940s. Then, rice farmers worried they would be cut off from the river water they needed. They dropped their objections when they signed contracts under which they would have rights to some of the water stored in the new reservoirs.

Since then, during most years they have been able to draw not just from the water the LCRA is legally obligated to release to keep the Colorado River flowing, but also a share of the water stored in the new reservoirs. With it, they flood their fields with as much as 3 inches of water during the growing

season to kill off competing grass and weeds.

For most of the lakes' existence there was plentiful water. But dry spells have plagued the region for much of the past decade, including in 2006, 2008 and 2011 (the three lowest-inflow years in the lakes' history). The driest eight-month span in Texas history ended in May 2011, and five of the 10 lowest-inflow years have been since 2006.

As the lakes shriveled while the drought took hold, Austin city officials became increasingly insistent that more releases would jeopardize the area's water supply. They also noted that Austin and other communities had "firm" contracts with the LCRA, which assure a continual water supply and take precedence over the lower-cost "interruptible" water contracts held by rice farmers.

When local officials said in late 2011 that Austin shouldn't be asked for further cutbacks unless the rice farmers were cut off, Ronald Gertson, a rice farmer who often speaks for the farmers, responded that Austin was asking the LCRA to suddenly cut off food production — and risk peoples' livelihoods — partly for the sake of green lawns.

"If folks in cities were forced to stop watering their lawns so the city could meet whatever mandatory restrictions fall on them, that's not a horrible situation if it allowed food to be produced as a result," Gertson said.

The LCRA's board of directors struggled to find the balance between the \$55 billion Austin-area economy and the \$80 million to \$100 million economy based on rice farming downstream, Scott Spears, chairman of the board's water-operations committee, said at a recent news conference. He noted that the current board was the first in 72 years to cut off the rice farmers — and did it in both 2012 and 2013.

That decision came in the aftermath of one that had set lake interests screaming: In 2011 the board allowed two releases to the farmers. Following that, city leaders and two state senators from the area were increasingly vocal in their opinion that the region's water arithmetic had fundamentally changed.

A new normal?

They now point to the following calculations:

- The farmers consumed more water from the reservoirs in 2011 than Austin did over 15 years.
- Of the water Austin has consumed, 25 to 30 percent has gone to outdoor uses, Meszaros said, a category that is mostly lawn watering but also includes trees, gardens, foundation watering, pools and splash pads. In 2011, Austin consumed just under 32,000 acre-feet of water from the reservoirs for outdoor uses, and averaged 15,000 acre-feet per year since 2008, according to LCRA figures. That compares with 433,251 acre-feet from the reservoirs used by the rice farmers in 2011, 182,200 acre-feet the farmers used in 2010, 367,420 acre-feet in 2009 and 363,000 acre-feet in 2008. "Lawn watering versus rice farming is just a false comparison," Meszaros said. (An acre-foot of water — one acre of water one foot deep — is roughly what three households use in a year.)
- In what they call a "thought experiment," Austin water officials estimate that the lakes would be 60 percent to 70 percent full now if there had been no releases to the rice farmers since 2008, the dry year that followed the "rain bomb" that broke the previous drought. They say their calculation accounts for the water that would otherwise now be in the lakes, the amount of the additional water that would have evaporated and the water the LCRA would have been required to send downstream to meet its various obligations.
- If the LCRA had cut off the releases to rice farmers in 2011, when the

current drought had settled in, the lakes now would be 45 percent to 55 percent full, accounting for evaporation, according to city estimates.

The lakes were still 70 percent full before the 2011 releases. But Meszaros insists that “even then, we should have been curtailing the rice farmers more aggressively.”

“In one of the driest periods in Central Texas history, the rice farmers took more water from the lakes than ever,” he said. “Does that make any sense? What if we have another five years to go? The drought of record lasted 10 years. But the planning didn’t account for that.”

The LCRA said that cutting off the rice farmers in 2008 “is not consistent with our obligations” set forth in the official water management plan.

“It is certain that if we had provided no water to the farmers since 2008, there would be more water in the Highland Lakes today,” according to a statement, which states that determining how much is complicated by factors such as Lake Travis having briefly filled up in May 2010.

Since 2009, various stakeholders and the LCRA have been hashing out a new plan for managing the lakes. Austin officials say the plan should be reworked because it doesn’t adequately account for what is now happening. Earlier this year, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, which must approve the plan, said the predictions on which the plan is based must account for what happened in 2010, ’11 and ’12.

Flood control, storage, leisure

People living along the Highland Lakes have also been making a very public case against the LCRA.

The nonprofit Central Texas Water Coalition formed when residents grew dissatisfied with stakeholder meetings the LCRA held in 2010 as it drafted the new water management plan. The coalition pledges to make a member available at any community meeting and has a core beef similar to Austin's: that the LCRA let the lake levels drop, and thereby damaged the area's aesthetics and economy.

In Tow, a Llano County town with 500 or so residents and an additional 1,000 living in the vicinity, docks stretch into empty air. A scattering of homes have "For Sale" signs, and residents say many more have already been sold or foreclosed upon.

"We feel the input we've given the LCRA has been completely ignored," said Kevin Klein, a coalition member and semiconductor-industry executive with a cottage on Lake Buchanan.

In response, LCRA leaders point to what some see as an unfortunate reality: When Klein bought lakeside property, there was no guarantee it would remain so at all times. When Doug Scott bought Pelican Point as a distressed property two years ago, there was no telling when the waters would return. When Rusty Brandon opened the now-bankrupt Hi-Line Lake Resort, he chose a lake that rises when water is plentiful and shrivels when it is scarce.

The lakes were built to control flooding and supply water. Other considerations are secondary, and part of a tangle of competing interests.

"It's a whole system," Motal said. "It's an entire river system" the LCRA must manage.

Though the LCRA's legal charter is clear, water coalition members argue it doesn't jibe with public-relations efforts dating back to the 1950s. They say

the result is a set of mixed messages that muddled the perception of the LCRA's priorities.

For instance, in 1951 the LCRA, federal and state agencies settled on the name Highland Lakes of Texas to aid "the LCRA's efforts to promote tourism and recreation on the lakes," according to agency promotional videos. The LCRA worked with communities near the lakes to market the area and got the word out through billboards, brochures and trade shows, even creating a kilt-wearing cowboy named Tex McLoch as a mascot.

"This region was perfect as a recreational mecca," LCRA staff historian John Williams says in one of the videos. "That industry exists today thanks in part by the groundwork laid by the LCRA and area communities more than half a century ago."

The LCRA's promotional efforts didn't end then. A recent LCRA promotional video starts by asking, "Ready to Grow?" and promises the "LCRA can help" through "planning assistance ... and working with local businesses to be successful and thrive."

It ends by exhorting communities, "Get Growing!"

Link to another –

Lake Buchanan withers during Texas drought:

<http://www.mystatesman.com/interactive/news/water/lake-buchanan/levels/?ref=cbTopWidget>