



TEXAS WATER UPDATE

Record rainfalls and rising lake levels across much of the state have brought smiles to the faces of Texans, bringing hope that the economic and water supply challenges brought on by an extended drought have ended. Unfortunately, experts say that's not the case.

John Hofmann, executive vice president for water at the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA), says while lake levels may have risen dramatically, some lakes that serve as key sources for drinking water are "... a long way from being full."

Hofmann says, "A wet month — even an extremely wet one like the May we just had — isn't enough to break this drought." While LCRA officials say it's possible to have flooding in the middle of a drought, as many Texas communities have experienced in recent weeks, Hofmann told the *Austin American-Statesman* that we're not out of this drought "... by a long stretch." The LCRA website points out that during the worst drought in Highland Lakes' history (1947-1957), flooding rains in 1952 caused Lake Travis to rise more than 56 feet in a day. However, the rain did not end the drought, which continued for another five years.

Lakes Travis and Buchanan, key sources of drinking water for more than 1 million Central Texas residents in one of the country's fastest growing regions, have been a major concern for area leaders. Declining lake levels have resulted in unprecedented business closings and job losses for the lake area, while raising alarms that the region's primary water supply may not be dependable.

Water concerns are increasing throughout the state, not just in Central Texas. With significant growth occurring in the state's population and expected to continue, uncertain water supplies can pose real and challenging threats to the state's drinking water, public health and the economy.

RAINFALL AND RESPONSIBLE WATER MANAGEMENT ARE ESSENTIAL

Despite the record rains, Central Texans are quick to point out that rainfall is not the only factor critical to meeting future water supply demands. They reference water management decisions in 2011 that resulted in more than half of the water in Lake Travis being released downstream with huge water losses

Despite flooding rainfalls in 1952 that raised the level of Lake Travis by 56 feet in one day, the drought of record continued five more years.

10 Lowest Annual Inflows on Record for Lake Buchanan and Travis

| Rank | Year | Annual Total (in acre-feet) |
|------|------|-----------------------------|
| 1 | 2011 | 127,802 |
| 2 | 2014 | 209,023 |
| 3 | 2013 | 216,353 |
| 4 | 2008 | 284,462 |
| 5 | 2006 | 285,229 |
| 6 | 1963 | 392,589 |
| 7 | 2012 | 393,426 |
| 8 | 1983 | 433,312 |
| 9 | 1999 | 448,162 |
| 10 | 2009 | 499,732 |

Average annual inflows for the period 1942-2014 stand at **1,216,295** acre-feet.

In the past 9 years, the lakes have received 7 of the all-time lowest annual water inflow totals.

Source: LCRA

along the way for irrigation of extremely water-intensive crops along the coast. The large releases of water and continuing drought resulted in the lake declining to roughly one-third its capacity. It has only recently begun to recover, but unless the state acts to protect the lake from similar mass releases, large amounts of water could again be released, repeating the cycle of declining levels.

Amendments to the LCRA's Water Management Plan (WMP) that would establish higher thresholds for releases of stored water were submitted to the TCEQ by the LCRA and remain pending before the TCEQ. While some downstream interests have attempted to portray the decision as a fight over "watering lawns versus growing rice," the economic impact of depleted lakes and future threats to the region's drinking water supply are the primary and obvious reasons for the policy dialogue.

The region's WMP is used to determine at what level water can be released to the user groups as well as for other purposes, such as environmental. The battle over the release levels has elevated discussion about the future feasibility of linking the fate of such a water-intensive crop as rice to the primary source of drinking water for one of the fastest-growing regions in the country. The inefficiency of flooding rice fields has brought renewed interest in pursuing greater use of alternative water supplies for rice farming and a more conservation-based pricing formula for agriculture use.

THE PRICING ISSUE

While many individuals don't analyze their water rates, a closer look at what others pay might change that dynamic. Currently, municipal and business users in Central Texas pay 27 times more than the rice farmers downstream, with agricultural interests receiving millions of gallons of water at \$6.50 per acre-foot compared to \$175.00 per acre-foot for nonagricultural users. The pricing is based on negotiated contracts and provides little, if any, incentive to conserve. Area

groups committed to protecting the region's water supply are working to raise awareness about the pricing disparity and encourage appropriate adjustments to ensure responsible use of water resources. No matter where we live, it's clear that conservation is a critical, central tenet of responsible water management for the future. The price of water motivates us to conserve.

WATER AND OUR FUTURE

While recent rains have brought relief to drought-stricken regions of the state, water experts are encouraging the public and policymakers to recognize that protecting lakes as primary sources of drinking water and key economic drivers requires not only rainfall but ongoing conservation and responsible management strategies. If Texas is to sustain its strong business climate, economic growth and quality of life, all aspects of water use, from personal and business use to decisions about the type of crops we grow, must be examined.

Even as conditions improve, we must continue to focus on the responsible management of this precious resource.

As the LCRA's Hofmann stated, "In terms of water supply, we shouldn't consider this drought over yet."

