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Drought Protection Makes Sense for the Brazos River Basin

By Phil Ford

The people living in the Brazos River basin have a chance to weigh in on an issue of tremendous importance for every individual, community and business in our part of Texas. The issue at hand is whether we will have enough water to meet our needs in the future. In the decades to come, this issue will be critical. Estimates show that the population in the Brazos River basin is expected to double by the year 2060. The amount of water we now have available in our basin will not be enough to meet our needs. We must plan ahead.

Recently, the Brazos River Authority took a fundamental step toward guaranteeing the people of our basin an affordable, plentiful water supply. We filed an application with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) for additional water rights within our basin. A water right is a permit from the state that allows permit holders to use specified amounts of water. If approved, this proposal will give the Authority access to ample new water rights and allow us the flexibility to operate our existing supplies more efficiently.

The permit application filed with the TCEQ includes a number of plans that cover how the Authority would manage water conservation, drought protection and management of water supply. Together, these plans will help insure that the Brazos River basin, which extends from the New Mexico border north of Lubbock southeast to Freeport at the Gulf Coast, will be able to meet the needs of the expanding population as well as plan for a worst-case scenario drought.

The permits Water Conservation and Drought Contingency plans have already been accepted by the TCEQ. If the permit is approved, a System Management Plan will also be developed. This plan will allow the BRA's chain of reservoirs that lie within the Brazos River basin to be operated together as one large water supply rather than smaller local supplies.

The System Management and Drought Protection permit we are requesting is a highly advanced, cost-effective, and timely plan for managing our water resources. With the permit, we will be able to make additional water available almost immediately. Efficient use of the water we currently have will greatly delay the need to build new reservoirs – thus saving money for the state and allowing Texas farms and ranches to remain productive instead of being inundated with water to build new reservoirs.

The permit will also dedicate a greater amount of water flowing in our rivers to remain there to protect our regions fish and wildlife resources. It's not often that the best solution to a problem is the one that is the best for the environment, the least expensive and the fastest to obtain. In this instance, that's exactly the case.

So, if this permit provides so many benefits to our area, why do we have to go through an application process? Though we, as water providers, believe this permit application is the least expensive and best way to assure water for the future of our basin, there may be other groups already holding water permits that may fear their own rights will be endangered. The processes provided by the state through the TCEQ allow for residents, cities, businesses and industry to voice their opinion about the application as it is reviewed by the TCEQ. We are pleased this process is available to allow us to reassure the public that what we are proposing will not infringe on existing water users.

Before filing this application, the Authority spent nearly two years working with water engineers and hydrologists to insure that our application WILL NOT endanger other water rights. We've already worked with the cities and other water users to address their concerns and will continue to work with all concerned water rights holders in our basin.

The public now has an opportunity to ask questions, voice their concerns or express their opinions about this permit application through hearings hosted by the TCEQ. We believe, and we hope you will agree, that at the end of the day our System Operation Permit makes sense for the people of the Brazos River basin. We appreciate your support.

Phil Ford is General Manager of the Brazos River Authority.