

Water Partnership Should Become Model for Texas

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by Lyle Larson, representative of District 122 in the Texas House

The year 2014 began with the Edwards Aquifer clocking in at 640.7 feet, its lowest level for that date in more than five decades. On Aug. 12, the Edwards Aquifer Authority imposed Stage IV drought restrictions for the first time in the entity's history. The effects of the drought in San Antonio are inescapable.

As San Antonio's population continues to explode while the drought presses on, we need to ensure that the increased demand for water can be met.

Until just a few decades ago, San Antonio relied solely on water from the pristine Edwards Aquifer. With the formidable combination of increased demand for water and extreme drought conditions in recent years, it has become clear that we must work harder than ever to find opportunities to diversify our community's water supply.

There is no question that San Antonio Water System has done an excellent job planning for our city's future by working to diversify San Antonio's water resources through conservation, the effective use of its aquifer storage and recovery facility, the development of what will be the largest inland brackish desalination plant and, most notably, for completing negotiations on and approving the contract for the Vista Ridge Pipeline project — a 140-mile pipeline that would carry groundwater from Central Texas to San Antonio.

The Vista Ridge project presents our city with an opportunity to become the template for the state in developing regional partnerships to provide water security. This is how water development in Texas is supposed to work — regional partners working together for the state's overall good. Two partners in the Vista Ridge project are SAWS and the Post Oak Savannah Groundwater Conservation District.

The Post Oak Savannah Groundwater Conservation District should be commended for its diligence in balancing its statutory obligation to conserve, protect and properly manage the Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer while it also protects landowner property rights and equitably manages local resources for generations to come. This balanced management means that the private property rights of the rural landowners in the Vista Ridge project are protected — however not at the expense of the local community.

For example, an important feature of the district's management is the use of transport fees imposed on export projects such as Vista Ridge. These fees fund conservation grants for local utilities to ensure the economic vitality of Milam and Burleson counties.

This rural to urban water transport project, which includes more than 3,400 water leases with local landowners in Milam and Burleson counties, covering 85,000 acres of land, will help meet

the needs of a major city without having a detrimental impact on the agricultural or economic interests of the rural counties. The project is an immensely better approach than others previously attempted, such as a public utility entering a community under a cloak of darkness, purchasing large tracts of land and setting up a well field to harvest water, disregarding farming and ranching interests in the area.

As the Vista Ridge contract goes forward for approval by the San Antonio City Council, we should support the project for San Antonio and the communities along the I-35 corridor, which will get one step closer to water sustainability for today and for future generations. Drought and population growth will make regional partnerships, such as the proposed Vista Ridge pipeline agreement with the San Antonio Water System, necessary for Texas' future.

Water will play a pivotal role in the upcoming Texas legislative session. One of my priorities will be to put an end to the so-called "water wars." They are simply un-Texan. Instead, the Legislature must provide the leadership in the next legislative session to reinforce positive examples of regional cooperation such as the Vista Ridge project.

We are all proud of being Texans. Now let's start working together toward a common goal: to secure our state's water future.