



Texas Water Journal

Volume 11 Number 1 | 2020





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Volume 11, Number 1

2020

ISSN 2160-5319

texaswaterjournal.org

THE TEXAS WATER JOURNAL is an online, peer-reviewed journal devoted to the timely consideration of Texas water resources management, research, and policy issues. The journal provides in-depth analysis of Texas water resources management and policies from a multidisciplinary perspective that integrates science, engineering, law, planning, and other disciplines. It also provides updates on key state legislation and policy changes by Texas administrative agencies.

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The Texas Water Journal is published in cooperation with the Texas Water Resources Institute, part of Texas A&M AgriLife Research, the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University.


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Commentary: Water: A Preventable Disaster

Texas Senator Charles Perry¹

Editor-in-Chief's Note: The opinion expressed in this commentary is the opinion of the individual author and not the opinion of the Texas Water Journal or the Texas Water Resources Institute.

¹ Texas Senator Charles Perry, Senate District 28, Chair of the Senate Committee on Water and Rural Affairs

Citation: Perry C. 2020. Commentary: Water: A Preventable Disaster. Texas Water Journal. 11(1):172-173. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.21423/twj.v11i1.7129>.

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As we enter the 87th Session of the Texas Legislature, we will once again confront disaster just as we did at the beginning of last session. This time, we are not mitigating a catastrophic weather event but recovering from a pandemic that resulted in business shutdowns, high unemployment, and a state budget deficit. This session will be about lessons learned (good and bad) while developing best practices for the next storm to come.

Over 5 million Texans filed for unemployment insurance benefits in 2020 with over 4 million COVID-19 related job losses (Texas Workforce Commission UI Claimant Dashboard n.d.). Throughout the pandemic, Senate District 28 had over 12,000 new unemployment claims from all industry sectors (Texas Workforce Commission UI Claimant Dashboard n.d.). There is no doubt this legislative session will focus on our state's resiliency and road to recovery.

As tragic as COVID-19 is, it cannot be a reason to stop long-term planning. Transportation, education, infrastructure, and principally, water supply development must continue to be a priority. Part of a resilient Texas lies with the focus on our state's natural resources. As I have repeatedly said, the future of our economy is built on a stable and reliable water supply. Businesses have continued to move to Texas, but they will not if Texas does not have the ability to meet their infrastructure needs. By drawing on Texas ingenuity, we can leverage technology, public-private partnerships, and regulations that will encourage the creation of new water sources while expanding existing strategies.

Following the 86th Legislative Session, it was my intention to dive deep into what our state can do for future water supply. The pandemic derailed planned interim hearings with water experts. However, I continued to hold meetings and request information from stakeholders in produced water management, aquifer storage and recovery, water reuse, and more for our interim report.

There are over 34,000 disposal wells in the state according to the Texas Railroad Commission. In 2017, there were 9.8 billion barrels of produced water which is over 1 million acre feet. Nearly 47% of the produced water was used for enhanced oil recovery with the remaining 53% injected into the ground for disposal (16 August 2019 meeting with Leslie Savage, Chief Geologist, Texas Railroad Commission; unreferenced). What if Texas could capture all produced water and turn it into a viable water source? Through our research, we found that many in the oil and gas industry and commercial water recycling groups have the technology. Scalability, distribution, and economic models have not been developed to determine the viability of converting produced water to a potable source. A bill to determine viability will be introduced in this legislative session. Consolidating all the technologies and stakeholder groups into one room to work together is needed. It is my intention to continue to encourage the partnership of science, private industry, and the state to tap into this potential water supply.

As a reminder, Texas entered drought quickly in Fall 2020. COVID-19 caught us by surprise; there is no excuse for a deficient water supply to catch us by surprise. Texas and the nation can prevent water scarcity. Our state is anchored by the Gulf of Mexico, with rivers, aquifers, and reservoirs for water resources and storage capacity. If we have a water supply issue, we must look no further than the mirror. Texas can do this!

REFERENCES

- Texas Workforce Commission UI Claimant Dashboard. n.d. Austin (Texas): Texas Workforce Commission. Updated 23 November 2020. Accessed 23 November 2020. <https://texasmapsonline.com/portal/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=e3e490c4196a45868610f65b72e9f303>.