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Commentary: Water Infrastructure and Supply Are the Backbone or Achilles' Heel of Texas' Future: The Choice is Ours

Charles Perry*¹

Editor-in-Chief's Note: In every odd-numbered year, the Texas Legislature convenes in regular session for 140 days. With this in mind, the Texas Water Journal invited Senator Charles Perry, Chairman of the Senate Water, Agriculture, and Rural Affairs Committee to discuss his priorities and visions for Texas water and the regular session of the 88th Texas Legislature. 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, or the Bureau of Economic Geology.

Keywords: 88th Texas State Legislature, Texas Senate, Texas water policy

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2 Water Infrastructure and Supply Are the Backbone or Achilles' Heel of Texas' Future

With the 88th Legislative Session fully underway, I remain steadfast in my commitment to water infrastructure and water supply. It is clear: For Texas to succeed, we must have access to dependable and safe drinking water. Investing in existing infrastructure to make every drop count and pursuing new water sources must become a priority of the State.

Having grown up in West Texas, I know the value of water. As chairman of the committee overseeing water policy in the Senate since 2015, my goal has always been to extend the existing water supply and diligently search for more supply opportunities.

First, we can address our aging and leaking infrastructure through investment in our smaller systems. The state continues to grow, putting strain on rural and midsized communities. An estimated 136 billion gallons of water loss occurs annually through leaking pipes according to the Texas Water Development Board (TWDB). With an estimated 70% of water line infrastructure in Texas nearing, at, or beyond the end of its life expectancy, this is the session we can address the issue.

Second, let the nationwide recent water shortages be a warning to our state. Without setting up supply for years to come, we will be struggling with drought and communities without water. It is time to look beyond our borders. According to the TWDB, our state will be 7 million acre feet short on water supply in 50 years.

Our neighboring states have access to excess water that Texas can develop. Additionally, marine desalination has been vastly underutilized. While there are 35 brackish desalination plants in Texas, there are zero in the Gulf of Mexico. California has six active plants. Texas must "tap" every available resource by making water a biannual discussion and consideration.

I am proposing a fund that would provide needed investment in both water infrastructure and supply. On the supply side, the funding would aim to reach 7 million acre feet of projects committed in 10 years, putting Texas on track to beat that 50-year timeline.

One example of new water supply is to recover half of the 14 million barrels of water a day that comes out of the ground from oil and gas production. The Texas Produced Water Consortium is ready to conduct pilot projects and testing of this potential new water source from oil and gas production. Another example is to look to our neighbors just east of Texas. Louisiana has expressed interest in moving supply to Texas, and with the right investment, our state can start the nationwide conversation of water security for our agriculture, manufacturing, and residential uses.

Water is as much an infrastructure item as roads, bridges, and communications. The 88th Legislative Session can establish the footprint for current and future water supply development. The lack of urgency and understanding and in some cases the disbelief that water is an issue can no longer be acceptable. Our world has the same core needs as we have in the past. Where there is water, there is life.