Legislature considers water conservation program

In March, the House adopted a bill that establishes a new water infrastructure fund to provide state assistance to water providers seeking to build new reservoirs, pipelines, and other supply projects. The bill sets aside 20 percent of funding for conservation and reuse projects. If a related bill passes the Legislature and is approved by voters this November, $2 billion would be transferred from the state’s “rainy day fund” to the new water fund, with at least $400 million going toward conservation and reuse programs.

Getting more from a gallon of water

Environment Texas Director Luke Metzger testified calling for the Legislature to set aside at least half of any water funding for conservation, reuse, repairs to leaking water mains, and to purchase water rights to protect flows in our rivers for wildlife and recreation.

“In every sector of water use, new technologies and better management practices can enable us to get more out of a gallon of water,” he said. “We can’t control when it rains, but we can control how we use water. State funding can help cut water waste, improve water conservation, and steer Texas toward a more sustainable water future.”

Prioritize conservation over reservoirs

Conservation funding could support improving irrigation practices in agriculture, increasing use of drought-tolerant landscaping, repairing leaking municipal water mains and helping Texans save water in their homes and businesses.

But we remain concerned about the many proposed water projects that could have severe environmental consequences. The proposed Marvin Nichols Reservoir would flood 30,000 acres of increasingly rare bottomland forest. And desalination plants produce massive amounts of waste in the form of brine.

On Mar. 19, Environment Texas Research and Policy Center released, “Keeping Water in Our Rivers: Strategies for Conserving Limited Water Supplies.” The report found that Texas could save 500 billion gallons of water per year in 2020, enough to meet the needs of 9 million Texans.

“There’s no bigger priority right now,” said Metzger. “We need to make sure that we not only recover from this historic drought, but that we figure out how Texas will sustain our water needs for years to come.”

For more information on our efforts to Save Texas Rivers, visit www.EnvironmentTexas.org or follow us on Facebook at Facebook.com/EnvironmentTexas

Low water levels at the Rio Grande
Recent action

President commits to tackle global warming
In his inaugural address, President Obama committed to do more to tackle global warming in his second term, building on the strong foundation his administration laid over the last four years. He spoke more on climate change than any other issue in his speech.

“We will respond to the threat of climate change, knowing that failure to do so would betray our children and future generations,” said President Obama. “Some may still deny the overwhelming judgment of science, but none can avoid the devastating impact of raging fires, and crippling drought, and more powerful storms.”

The president’s commitment comes after increasing climate-related disasters, including the worst drought since the Dust Bowl and record heat here in Texas.

“We’ve certainly seen and felt the devastating effects of global warming here in Texas,” said Director Luke Metzger. “We can’t go on like this. The president must make fighting global warming a number one priority.”

Judge rules to protect whooping cranes
On Mar. 10, a federal judge ruled that the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) violated the Endangered Species Act by failing to guarantee sufficient flows of water in the Guadalupe and San Antonio River Basins.

The court ordered the TCEQ not to approve or grant new water permits affecting the Guadalupe or San Antonio Rivers, “until the state of Texas provides reasonable assurances to the court” that new permits would not result in harm to the whooping cranes. The order was in response to a lawsuit filed by the Aransas Project, an alliance of municipalities, businesses, citizens and organizations, including Environment Texas.

“This is great news for the majestic whooping crane, an icon of Texas wildlife, our coastal estuaries and for the people who love swimming and tubing the Guadalupe River,” said Environment Texas’ Luke Metzger.

To our members

As I write this, there are still six weeks to go before the end of the session, but so far, it’s looking pretty good!

The Legislature is poised to restore much of the funding for the parks department, averting the closure of 20 state parks. They’re also moving forward with a historic increase in funding for water conservation.

And bad bills to repeal Austin’s ban on plastic bags or the state renewable energy law don’t seem to be going anywhere.

This success is no accident—it’s a testament to what can happen when people who care share resources and ideas and work hard. That’s what being part of Environment Texas is all about.

Thanks for all you do.

Sincerely,

Luke Metzger
Director

Toward a greener future

Environment Texas and Environment Texas Research & Policy Center gratefully accept bequests, beneficiary designations of IRAs and life insurance, and gifts of securities to support our work to build a cleaner, greener, healthier future.

For more information, call 1-800-841-7299 or send an email to: PlannedGiving@EnvironmentTexas.org.

www.EnvironmentTexas.org/newsletters

Photo: Staff

Photo: NPS

Photo: Staff

Director Luke Metzger and son Gus in Neches River National Wildlife Refuge

Photo: NPS
A tale of two (solar) cities

San Antonio and Austin install 85 percent of all solar in Texas

The municipally owned utilities in San Antonio and Austin have supported the installation of four times more solar photovoltaic (PV) capacity than the rest of Texas combined, or 85 percent of the state total, according to a new Environment Texas Research and Policy Center report.

“Texas’ solar story is primarily a tale of two cities—San Antonio and Austin—with the rest of the state largely languishing in the shadow,” said Luke Metzger, director of Environment Texas. “It’s time we reach for the sun and bring clean solar energy to the rooftops of all of Texas’ homes, schools and businesses.”

1,000 local solar projects

The report credits San Antonio and Austin’s strong policies that encourage solar power on residences and businesses, and in utility-scale installations. Austin Energy has completed more than 1,000 individual solar projects on the rooftops of homes, businesses, schools and municipal buildings as well as one utility-scale facility, the 35 MW solar facility in nearby Webberville, which ranks second among Texas cities.

Saving water, reducing pollution

Environment Texas stressed that greater use of solar energy can help reduce the need for coal and natural gas power plants that cause air pollution, contribute to global warming and use excessive amounts of precious water for cooling.

The group also cited a recent study by the operator of Texas’ electricity grid (ERCOT), which shows that the most cost-effective way to meet the state’s growing need for electricity on the hottest summer days is to add solar and wind energy generating capacity rather than natural gas-fired power plants.

Best solar potential in the nation

Texas has the best solar energy potential in the nation. According to the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, Texas has the potential to generate more than 100 times our current electric use from solar power. But despite the leadership of San Antonio and Austin, Texas ranks just 13th in the nation for installed solar.

Two promising bills

Our report highlighted two bills filed in the Legislature that could help expand the state’s use of solar energy. HB 1094 (Keffer) and SB 385 (Carona), which would update Texas’ Property-Assessed Clean Energy financing law to enable lenders to offer commercial and residential property owners a secure, long-term financing option for solar PV systems and other energy efficiency and water conservation improvements.

“We can have solar power on every roof on your block, on your office, atop your local schools, and on nearby retail outlets, generating clean energy to power our lives and repower our economy,” said Metzger. “Texas has this potential, and we at Environment Texas are working hard to make sure that this potential becomes a reality for our state soon.”

To read the full report visit www.EnvironmentTexasCenter.org

Reaching for the Sun

Summer Report | 2013

Town hall meeting held on drought and conservation

Hundreds of Texans attended town hall meetings in April on Texas’ water future, organized by Environment Texas Research and Policy Center. The events, held in Brownsville, San Antonio, Houston and Dallas, featured experts on the threats facing Texas’ rivers and on the potential for water conservation to meet our water needs, and gave attendees the chance to ask questions of local elected officials.

Approximately 93 students and community members came to our event at UT Brownsville. Dr. Antonio Zavaleta, an anthropology professor at UTB, spoke about the cultural significance of the Rio Grande over time, and the negative impact that the construction of the dams has had on the river in recent decades. Jack Moffitt, a local farmer and the manager of the Brownsville farmers market, spoke about the impact of the drought on farmers and the tremendous potential for water conservation in agriculture. Dr. Jude Benavides, a professor of hydrology at UTB, discussed the projected demand for water in the Rio Grande Valley over the next several decades, and stressed the necessity for making conservation a top priority if we are going to meet our future needs. Finally, Linda Forse, a Brownsville resident who is training to become a master gardener, talked about the need for local and state policies to encourage xeriscaping, or low-water landscaping, in residential settings.
The House and Senate have approved a budget that increases funding for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department by $35 million over the previous biennium. This funding level would likely prevent any park closures and is a big win for open space.

“This budget is a big improvement for our parks after the devastating cuts of last session,” said Rikki Seguin, Environment Texas outreach director. “Our state parks let us experience nature and preserve Texas history. They protect the clean water we depend on and provide a critical home for wildlife. These treasured places should never be closed. We applaud the Legislature for responding to the public outcry and making sure our parks are kept open and safe.”

A major push by Environment Texas and our allies led a budget conference committee in the 11th hour to restore funding for the local park grants program, which provides matching funds assistance to Texas’ local governments for local park and recreation areas, facility development and outdoor outreach programs.