Speech - April 29, 2002


(NOTE: Gov. Perry frequently deviates from prepared text.)

Thank you Commissioner White (Kathleen Hartnett White)

To many Texans, the water needs of this state are summed up by a simple expectation: when they go to turn on the faucet, water will be there...and it will be safe, drinkable and abundant.

Water is the key to life, and it’s the key to the future of our state. For Texas to prosper long into the future, we must ensure we have a supply of water that is safe, that is easily replenished, and that is used efficiently.

In San Antonio, there is great cause for concern about the long-term availability of an abundant source of water because of heavy dependence on one source: the Edwards Aquifer. You have a distinct interest in finding a long-term solution to water availability, because even with your good conservation program, population growth will increasingly strain your water supply.

In December 2001, the Texas Water Development Board approved 16 regional water plans that lay a firm foundation for meeting the water needs of Texas for the next 50 years - on a region by region basis. I applaud the efforts of each and every Texan who worked tirelessly to prepare their water strategies.

As Governor of Texas, I have an obligation to look at the big picture and help develop new water resources for the future of all Texans. Today I want to discuss my plan which offers new options to meet the needs identified in these 16 regional plans, and which goes even further to ensure a clean, available supply of water for our growing and thirsty state.

I believe water policy should be focused on four critical goals. First, we must ensure we have an abundant supply of water by looking for new sources of water, and improving our use of current sources.

Second, we must continue to strive for better water conservation, efficiency, and water use practices.

Third, we must focus on using innovative financing tools that will accelerate the construction of needed water projects.

And fourth, we must take every measure necessary to protect our water supply from sabotage.

By improving water use, making water infrastructure more efficient and more secure, and conserving existing sources while looking to tap new sources of water - water will be safe and available for future generations of Texans.

For centuries, Texas has relied on surface and aquifer water for human and agricultural uses.
It's time to look for new and untapped sources. There is no greater potential supply of new water than what splashes along hundreds of miles of Texas coastline...saltwater from the Gulf of Mexico.

Though Texas has some inland desalination plants to make the water from certain surface and groundwater sources drinkable, we presently have no desalination plants along the Texas coast to remove salt from ocean water. There have been discussions about building a coastal desalination plant, but no one yet has broken ground.

As technology improves, and as other states and nations move forward with desalination, I believe it is time Texas invested in a demonstration desalination project along the Texas coast.

It is not a matter of whether saltwater will one day be used as an abundant source for public use, but when it will be used. Too many cities in Texas, and too many private business and individual users, will one day be fighting over increasingly scarce water resources as our population continues to grow. What we need in Texas is greater water independence through greater water availability!

Texas must have the courage to look into the future and invest today in a better tomorrow. That means tapping into the greatest source of water known to mankind...a source which Texans are blessed to have easy access to: ocean water.

That's why today I am asking the Texas Water Development Board, in concert with regional water planning groups and the private sector, to develop a proposal for building Texas' very first large-scale coastal desalination plant to produce drinking water using the latest technology.

Currently, groundwater provides 58 percent of the water we use in Texas. If we look to the almost limitless supply of water coming from the ocean, eventually there will be fewer disputes revolving around issues like the rule of capture, inter-basin transfers, and the regulation of groundwater sources.

Though it may be many years, if not decades, before ocean water is a prime source of water for Texans to use, we must begin the groundwork today so that future Texans have an abundant, drought-proof supply of water.

Desalination can solve the water availability question for the Alamo City, either through the eventual transportation of desalinated ocean water west, or because in supplying ocean water to coastal cities, their dependence on surface and groundwater sources will be decreased - allowing those waters to stay upstream for other parts of the state.

Some will argue that cost is too great an obstacle. In a moment I will discuss innovative financing options. But we must all keep in mind simple economics: the cost of a resource decreases as its supply increases.

The second part of my plan includes using new technology and better practices to not only tap into new sources of water, but to replenish old sources of water, and help use those sources more efficiently.

We lose too much water to evaporation and aging water and wastewater infrastructure. For example, a half-inch hole in an 8-inch pipeline could leak up to 53 gallons a minute each day.

I want Texas to focus greater attention on funding needed water infrastructure improvements. There are several efficiency measures we should take.
We must fund infrastructure improvements - such as lining key canals to reduce absorption, and replacing old water pipelines - to prevent the waste of water resources. We must continue to develop and create incentives for range management plans and brush control projects to remove more water consumptive vegetation. For example, a large salt-cedar tree consumes up to 200 gallons of water per day.

We must encourage better use practices, especially by large users. I would like to see more entities tap into reusable water. Reusable water makes sense for golf courses and irrigation projects that use large quantities of water without a requirement to meet drinking water quality standards.

I am also asking all state agencies that oversee water use in some form or capacity to develop water use plans based on proven water efficiency practices.

And when it comes to more efficient water use, I want state entities to lead the way. That's why I will be asking all state agencies, coordinated through our Building and Procurement Commission, to evaluate ways to use water more effectively.

Efficient water use in conjunction with the exploration of new water sources is critical to any viable water plan. Of course, it is also important to identify additional funding sources.

I believe we can expedite needed water projects spelled out in the regional water plans with a couple of innovative measures. Private activity bonds...tax free investment bonds...have been used on a limited basis to finance water projects. Up until now, water projects have competed with other infrastructure projects for the same share of roughly $400 million in private activity bonds each year.

Today, I am advocating that water projects become the first priority for the use of those bond funds. If we used just half of those funds over the next five years for water, we would have close to $1 billion in additional funds for important water projects. That means we could fund the construction of a desalination plant, while using most of the available bond funds to accelerate the construction of priority projects in each of the 16 water regions.

Additionally, I am supporting measures in Congress which would remove the cap for water infrastructure private activity bonds.

We can also streamline the design and production phases on needed water projects by using the design-build method I have often discussed for transportation projects.

I also believe that we must continue to fund efforts to bring water and wastewater systems to residents of the colonias. So far, the Texas Water Development Board's EDAP program has been a tremendous success, and is on track to provide water service for nearly a quarter million Texans. I will support continued funding of this important effort so our neighbors in colonias have access to pure, abundant water.

Let me say a word or two about the water plans, and all the work that has already been done. With the leadership of Senator Brown, Representative Lewis, the late Bob Bullock, and concerned citizens across this state, Texas has taken a large leap forward in planning for the future.

Senate Bill 1, passed in 1997, started the water planning process. We now have regional water plans in place that are the basis for establishing important local policies on water use and water efficiency.

At the same time, making sure Texas has an abundant supply of water for every corner of
our state is a statewide issue. We can accelerate priority projects in the regional water plans, while exploring new ideas.

The regional water plans anticipate the importance of new ideas because one of the requirements is that they be updated every five years.

When those plans were submitted, there was no anticipation of a delivery mechanism that one day could supply water to all regions of this state: the Trans Texas Corridor.

As I have discussed before, the Trans Texas Corridor provides ample room for water pipelines, giving Texas a mechanism to transport water resources and to facilitate mutually beneficial water marketing agreements.

We expect our population to double over the next four decades. That growth will put a great strain on our water resources. We can't wait to address the issue of ensuring an abundant and safe water supply. We have to act today!

The last part of my plan emphasizes protecting our water sources and infrastructure from terrorism, sabotage or contamination. In the post-September 11th world, we know that our water supply is a potential target for terrorist activity. We must take steps to protect it.

Currently, there is a peace officer in every Texas park with a body of water. I will be asking the Texas Department of Parks and Wildlife to authorize their peace officers to police water intake structures and dams. Second, I will be asking the existing Multi-Jurisdictional Task Forces to protect Texas ports and Gulf Coast waterways as part of their mission.

The task forces already monitor our ports and waterways to prevent them from being used as conduits for drug trafficking. This new anti-terrorism mission fits with their existing anti-drug mission.

If we keep our water supply secure, and if we utilize more efficient water practices while utilizing new sources like ocean water, we can ensure Texans yet to be born will have a water supply that is pure and plentiful. That should be one of our chief goals as a state. Thank you.