Gov. Perry Speaks at Water 2025 Conference

*Note - Gov. Perry frequently departs from prepared remarks.

Thursday, August 14, 2003

In keeping with past traditions, this important discussion about water comes on the heels of a downpour here in Austin just three days ago. We ought to schedule these gatherings more often.

As many of you know, I come from a farming and ranching tradition that taught me to value the land and conserve our precious natural resources. Of course, the lifeblood of rural America – and for that matter our cities and suburbs – is that precious commodity we call water.

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.

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. Second, we must improve our use of current sources with better conservation and more efficient practices.

Third, we must focus on using innovative financing tools to accelerate the construction of needed water projects. And fourth, we must take every measure necessary to protect our water supply from sabotage.

With 600 miles of coastline, 11 major river systems, and 11,000 streams known by name, one might conclude that we are abundant in water. But we must confront some facts: our climate is not expected to change anytime soon, so we can expect more droughts, and we can count on continued summers of soaring heat. We can also count on our population trends to continue: that means our population will double in less than 50 years, and a greater percentage of our population will be urban and suburban.

When it comes to water, an old adage applies: if you fail to plan, you plan to fail.

That’s why we have begun planning, looking not to just one solution, but a multitude of answers to ensure a stable supply of water for years to come.

Last session I was proud to work with Senator Duncan and Representative Puente to establish the Water Conservation Implementation Task Force – a group composed of various water planners on the federal, state and local levels who are working to evaluate and recommend best practices related to conservation and water efficiency.
Their report is due in a little more than one year.

Of course, the planning process in Texas did not start this session. After years of drought in the 1990’s, the legislature in 1997 passed comprehensive reforms in the form of Senate Bill 1, which got the ball rolling toward the development of regional water plans which now serve as the basis of our statewide water plan.

And I was very proud to build on those reforms this session by signing House Bill 1370, a bill authored by my good friend from Corpus Christi, Representative Vilma Luna.

One day, I believe we will look back at this legislation as the catalyst for dramatic change in our water policies because its aim is to make desalination of coastal waters a viable option for the future.

For centuries, Texas has relied on surface and aquifer water for human, agricultural and wildlife uses. It’s time to look to 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.

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. We talk a lot about not being dependent on foreign nations for oil. We ought to see water in a similar light, as a commodity we must preserve and protect so Texas is always water independent!

Some will argue that conservation is the answer. To that, I say conservation is “an” answer. Yet there are other solutions we must explore, and none with greater potential than desalination.

In Texas, fights over water rights are about as intense as discussions about religion and politics.

Currently, nine aquifers provide 57 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.

Of course, some disputes are beyond our control as a state. For years we have sought resolution to the water dispute between Texas and Mexico. And for years, diplomacy has yielded little. Though Mexico has made some transfers this year, they have yet to produce a periodic schedule of future releases, they have yet to release any water from Chihuahua as the treaty requires, and they have yet to address the water debt of 1.4 million acre-feet – water that could ensure a living for thousands of Rio Grande Valley farmers.

Mexican officials complain about drought, but drought knows no international boundaries. And the data doesn’t support their claims. The facts show that water stored in Chihuahua reservoirs has doubled in amount since last year, increasing from 582,000 acre-feet to 1.15 million acre-feet. And satellite photos of Chihuahua show lush, green crops – not brown, drought-stricken vegetation.

Texas cannot act unilaterally; this is an issue that we must be resolved by our federal government and their Mexican counterparts. If the United States can meet its water treaty obligations, delivering three times as much water as is required of Mexico, then we should expect nothing less of Mexico. If diplomacy will not yield a fair result for our farmers, then maybe withholding regular releases to Mexico will.

I’m not interested in causing a fight; I’m interested in resolving a problem and doing so with the means at our disposal.
We must not only receive our fair share of water from Mexico, we must implement better use practices to ensure replenish existing sources of water.

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

I want Texas to focus greater attention on funding needed water 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. 

We must also 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 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, providing water service for a quarter million Texans.

I was also delighted to attend a ceremony in Eagle Pass a week ago to celebrate the largest water and wastewater construction project of its kind along the border. And similar projects are in the planning stages in three other Texas border communities.

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.

In the past, private activity bonds…which are tax free investment bonds…have been used on a limited basis to finance water projects. But, because of a change I advocated last session, we have expanded the use of Private Activity Bonds for water projects including water supply facilities, water conservation projects, and the development of new water resources such as desalination.

By improving water use, tapping into new sources, and utilizing innovative financing measures, we can go a long way toward securing a stable supply of water for a growing state. Of course, we are also taking every precaution to keep our current supply of water secure.

In the post-September 11th world, we know that our water supply is a potential target for terrorist activity. That’s why the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has authorized their peace officers to police water intake structures and dams. Second, we are working with the Multi-Jurisdictional Task Forces to protect Texas ports and Gulf Coast waterways as part of their mission.

Most Texans take a simple view on water: when they turn on the spigot, they expect it to be there. And when they visit a lake, river, or the coast, they expect their experience to be refreshing and safe. Of course, meeting those basic expectations takes a lot of planning, and a willingness to be innovative. But that’s what Texans do and it’s what we will continue to do to ensure a brighter future.