Gov. Perry Addresses the Texas Water Conservation Association

Calls for legislature to fund its comprehensive water plan

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

Wednesday, February 25, 2009

Thank you, Jerry [Clark, GM, Sabine River Authority, and TWCA president] for that introduction, and for leading an organization that is stewarding one of our state’s most precious resources.

Back in the 1600s, I’m told there was a man of the cloth in England named Thomas Fuller who said “We never know the worth of water till the well is dry.” I am pleased to be with a group of people who definitely know the worth of water and are committed to making sure that our state’s well never goes dry.

Probably better than anyone, you know that the preservation and allocation of this life-giving resource is one of the key challenges facing our state. Texas is feeling the increasing strain on our water supply as our population of 23 million adds 1,000 new Texans per day.

In fact, from 2007 to 2008, 30% of all Americans who moved from one state to another moved to Texas. Now some people might complain about those numbers, but I see them as rich with opportunity.

Those new Texans are being drawn here…or born here…with the promise of the chance to pursue their dreams, because Texas is a land of opportunity. That opportunity takes the forms of jobs…which are still being created in Texas despite these tough economic times.

From December 2007 to December ’08, roughly 80% of the jobs created in the United States from were in Texas. Think about that. Our state is home to roughly one of every ten Americans and we created eight out of every ten jobs.

Those new jobs represent about 153,600 more
Texans who are working to pay their bills and feed their families. As other states heap new taxes and regulations on them, employers are looking to Texas more and more.

Our efforts to limit government spending, keep taxes low, our legal system fair and our regulations predictable have led to an economic strength that most states can only fantasize about.

Combined with our state’s legendary work ethic, I believe those factors explain why we lead the nation in exports, job creation and Fortune 500 companies.

Now, you might ask yourself why I’m rattling off all these economic statistics at a water conference…but I do it for a reason. I believe our economic strength is going to carry us through this rough time and make living in Texas even more attractive.

As we add jobs and more people come here to fill them and pursue their dreams of prosperity, stress on our infrastructure will increase.

I’m talking about our roads and bridges that carry materials to our factories, products to market, and our citizens to work, home and church. I’m talking about our power distribution system that carries energy from our power plants and wind farms, and our water systems that supply our cities, homes, factories and hospitals.

The 2007 Texas State Water Plan projects that water demand will increase 18 percent over the next 50 years, and our population is expected to double in the same timeframe. If we are not wise stewards of these resources, we’ll have only ourselves to blame if we run out.

That’s why we must invest in our water plan before it’s too late.

I think the key strength of our plan is that it was not the product of central planning here in Austin. Instead, our plan is the result of a massive effort on the part of folks like you, local experts who know your local needs.

Fortunately the legislature had the wisdom to approve it. Seven years later, they have not yet found the dollars to make it a reality. That is why I am working more closely than ever with our legislators to find a way to fund that plan.

I am in favor of using $260 million to fund a new Infrastructure Account. This would allow us to utilize principal and interest for debt service on the acquisition of the previously designated reservoir sites.

Speeding up the acquisition and construction of these sites would provide cost-effective and reliable supplies of surface water sooner. This water would be used by industries, municipalities, utilities and other users all across the state.

If we do not take this bold action now, when will we? How long can we keep putting this investment off before we run out of the one thing no person can do without?

I am convinced that the right time is right now, so that our citizens, our children and grandchildren, will have access to this most vital of resources for the next fifty years.

As we build out this key infrastructure, we are also going to find ourselves running up against the issue of eminent domain, an issue that has caused a lot of heartache, because I believe it lacks clarity under Texas law.

I commend the Legislature for working on the issue over time, and their success on fixing individual issues, but it’s time to clear things up once and for all.

For example, in 2005, Senate Bill 7, made it clear Texans won’t tolerate having their land taken and given to another private party. In 2007, I wanted more protection for property owners, but the bill that reached my desk had been so
heavily modified from its original form that it would have done more harm than good.

I believe it is now time for a constitutional amendment that clearly codifies these essential protections for generations to come. I also hope we can reach consensus on other laws that protect landowners from other abuses of eminent domain.

For example, government shouldn’t use eminent domain to take someone’s land without making an honest effort to buy it first. It’s wrong for any government to make a lowball offer, then respond to an owner’s righteous refusal by taking the land.

Landowners should also be allowed to buy back land when it isn’t used for the project it was taken for, and buy it for the price the government paid for it, not its value on today’s market. That increase in value belongs to the landowner, not the government, and the landowner shouldn’t have to pay extra to get it back.

When you think about it, there are few things simpler than water. You take a little hydrogen, you add a little oxygen, and you get a substance that is essential to life. However, the issues that surround it demand frank conversations, visionary planning and tough choices.

Texas is fortunate to have people like you in the game, looking out for the best interests of our citizens, our employers and our state.

Thank you for all you do and thank you for your ongoing involvement in this challenge. Working together, we can ensure a bright, well-hydrated future for our state.

May God bless you all and, through you, may He continue to bless the great state of Texas.