

New desalination plans carry promise, risks

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Photo Credit: Chelsea Purgahn | Daily Texan Staff

After the floods in May and recent rains, it's easy to forget that Texas was, not so long ago, in a serious drought. In fact, the drought hasn't ended, and even when it does end, our state will still need to find freshwater resources to meet the needs of a growing population and booming economy. And we will have to do this while protecting the rivers, springs and lakes that make Texas a beautiful and healthy place to live. We must remember that developing new water resources can be costly in many ways, and regulators must take steps to minimize those costs.

Earlier this year, Gov. Greg Abbott signed [HB 2031](#), a bill that creates a [legal framework](#) for desalination plants integrated with power plants to be constructed to turn Gulf Coast seawater into freshwater and for seawater to be regulated by the state. Desalination is not going

to solve all of Texas' water shortage problems, but it's hard not to look at the Gulf of Mexico and see an opportunity to expand water resources. Desalination will be part of how we will get future water. At a legislative committee hearing on the bill in March, everyone who testified, both for and against the bill, from the Sierra Club to the Texas Desalination Association agreed that desalination should be part of how Texas secures water for its future.

Technological advances are making desalination more cost-effective and can be more environmentally friendly today than it has been in the past. However, it is still expensive to desalinate water, especially seawater. The Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority estimates that desalination will cost \$1 billion. The desalination process creates refuse with a high concentration of salt, which can be extremely bad for the immediate environment if it is not disposed of properly. Desalination requires a great deal of energy, and producing energy requires water. This means, under most current power generation methods, we will need to use freshwater resources and emit more pollution in order to desalinate seawater.

So, before we all get too excited about the endless water supply in the Gulf, we need to take into account the costs of desalination. Texas Water Development Board the state agency charged with implementation of this bill, should be mindful of all potential costs as it formulates the regulatory framework for coastal desalination. All those focusing on seawater desal, including both public and private sector interests, should consider all costs and take steps to minimize those costs. HB 2031 is a necessary and important step in securing enough water for our Texas's future. We cannot, however, lose sight of the fact that desalination, if not implemented well, can hurt Texas economically and environmentally. As desalination moves forward, future plant owners and state regulators must ensure desalination enhances rather than degrades our quality of life.

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