

Include needs of wildlife in Texas' water plans

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TRIB TALK

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Photo by Gabriel Cristóver Pérez

No one needs to tell Texans that water is a big deal — we know it in our bones. After enduring the drought that stretched from 2011 to 2015, we also know that planning for our future water needs is an urgent matter.

The Texas Water Development Board (TWDB) is in the process of revising the rules governing water planning. This is a big deal too. If we don't manage our most precious resource carefully Texas faces a future of constricted growth, economic decline and a diminished natural heritage.

With our state's population expected to grow by nearly 10 million people by 2030 (the equivalent of adding two more Houston-sized metropolitan areas), now is the time to get our water planning processes right. We need to double down on our efforts to conserve the water we have — using it as efficiently as possible — and on planning strategically to meet all water needs, including the water necessary to maintain our rivers, streams and bays. We must ensure that Texas' shared natural heritage is maintained and protected for future generations of Texans.

There are reasons to be hopeful. In recent years, our Regional and State Water Plans have increased their emphasis on water conservation and using water resources more efficiently. And increasingly, water utilities are stepping up their conservation programs.

Despite this progress, much more can and must be done to improve water conservation efforts. Current TWDB planning rules require consideration of water conservation best-management practices. That is a good start, but water plans should be required to incorporate those practices unless there is specific justification for not doing so, and best practices to minimize water loss from leaking water lines should be included without exception. Our shared water resources are too precious to waste.

Whether you care most about catching redfish, hunting redhead ducks, hearing the call of belted kingfishers, floating down a stream or just enjoying healthy wildlife populations, you've got a stake in ensuring that river flows and freshwater inflows to coastal bays are protected. And you can bet that if we don't plan to protect river flows, they won't get protected.

The Texas Legislature, when it set up the planning process, required TWDB to determine that plans are consistent with the long-term protection of the state's natural resources before they can be approved. Unfortunately, the existing TWDB rules have not adequately implemented that requirement. That needs to be fixed. In adopting rule amendments, the Texas Water Development Board must ensure that future water plans will be evaluated and sent back for revision if they don't plan for maintaining stream and river flows and freshwater inflows adequate to support the vibrant life and natural beauty of our waterways and coastal bays. Anything else simply is not good enough.



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