

## Some Thoughts on Our Water Future

It has been several months since I have written on the subject of water, but it is never far from my thoughts, or yours either I hope. Prior to the good rain we received on January 8, it had been well over two months since we had any meaningful rain at our house. This follows the previous 12 months (Sept. 2011 to Sept. 2012) when we had about 34 inches and the 12 months before that (Sept 2010 to Sept. 2011) when we had a little less than 9 inches. I guess you could say our rainfall amounts are “variable”.

Many folks ask things like, “Are we in a drought?” or “Is the drought over?”, but I think those are kind of meaningless questions which have only meaningless answers. It is not so important how much rain has fallen in the past months, but the condition of the vegetation, the amount of soil moisture, the river and creek flows, lake levels, and the level of the aquifers. And by most of those measurements (possibly excepting the vegetation condition) the good rains of late 2011 and the first 9 months of 2012 didn’t quite bring the other measurements up to “normal”.

What I believe is more important than whether we are in a drought or not, or whether there are water restrictions, is how we view and use water all the time. The Texas Water Development Board’s newest version of the Texas State Water Plan states, “In serious drought conditions, Texas does not and will not have enough water to meet the needs of its people, its businesses, and its agriculture enterprises”.

The TWDB has suggested a large number of projects to possibly find or create “new” water for Texas. But the cost is outlandishly expensive, many projects are politically and legally questionable, most all raise serious environmental concerns, and all will require many years to complete.

There is one thing, however, that requires relatively little extra money, can begin to bear fruit relatively soon, has no environmental issues, and at the very least will reduce the amount of “new” water required as well as postpone the time when it will be needed. Conservation.

Here I am not talking just about fixing leaky faucets and not running water when you brush your teeth, although all of those types of things help. Having water companies and municipalities fix water main leaks may save even more water. As people replace older appliances with more energy and water efficient ones, a lot of water can be saved.

It is estimated that 40 % of the water used by city dwellers is for outdoor use. Replacing non-native, water- and fertilizer-requiring lawns and reducing the size of lawns will greatly reduce that outdoor usage. As new homes are built, making provisions to use graywater and air conditioner condensate for landscape use is another large potential saving in water use.

Redesigning gardens with native and xeric landscape plants greatly reduces water demand. Here we can learn from folks that live in even drier places about how to have an attractive landscape that requires very little water.

Rainwater harvesting is an obvious answer to reduce the use of aquifer or river/lake water, both for city residents as well as rural landowners. Much of the water that falls on roofs in the city becomes storm water that in some cases leads to flooded streets. Capturing and releasing it slowly as it is used to water lawns and flower beds is a far better use.

A very large fraction of Texas water use is for agricultural crops, and many city-dwellers point fingers at farmers. But agriculture is a very important part of the economy of our state and we all like to eat. Using improved irrigation technologies, newer tillage techniques, and selection of less water-demanding crops, farmers can save a lot of water.

I know that it sounds like we all have to change our ways, and people often say that will never happen. But remember when seat belts were first introduced? People wouldn't wear them. And when almost everyone smoked? We do change our habits, even if it takes a while. It wasn't that long ago when the average car got only about 15 miles per gallon. Technology won't create any "new" water for us, but it can certainly help us to conserve what we have.

Use less, conserve more.

Until next time...

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