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East Texas preparing for a crowded water future

Defending East Texas' present-day water resources is no easy job, but trying to effectively protect future resources from 50 years in the past, with population and industry figures expected to steadily increase, is a monumental task. That is the responsibility given to the state's many groundwater conservation districts — to ensure today's usage levels don't endanger tomorrow's water supply.

"The state has passed legislation requiring each region to set desired future conditions (DFC) for their entire Groundwater Management Area. The state of Texas is divided into 16 GMAs, with most of East Texas being located in GMA 11," said Roy Rodgers, general manager of the Neches and Trinity Valley Groundwater Conservation District. "We are required to set desired future conditions of the aquifer for the year 2060. We need to have the DFC set by September of 2010, so we are striving to get the best information that we can."

Of the 28 counties in GMA 11, only seven are governed by a groundwater conservation district — the other 21 are what's considered "unprotected" counties. Unfortunately for the existing groundwater districts, state law dictates that they are also responsible for setting the DFCs for all unprotected counties in their GMA.

"Most of the counties in our management area are unprotected counties, so the few districts that do exist have to set the water plan for the entire area, so that's what we are working on now," Rodgers said.

Representatives from GMA 11's five groundwater districts will be present for a joint planning meeting at 10 a.m. Thursday at Nacogdoches City Hall. Len Luscomb of the Rusk County Groundwater Conservation District will present his county's DFC findings, and is expected to propose they be accepted as the DFC for the entire GMA.

"Rusk County hired some hydrologists to do some studies for them, and they are ready to move with their findings — but some of the districts are not ready to make this commitment yet," Rodgers said. "We don't have the groundwater availability models back yet that we need in order to accurately set our conditions. The only study they have is for their district, but they would like to set their DFC for the whole GMA."

According to Rodgers, he expects NTVGCD's figures to be available in one or two months, at which time the analysis can begin in earnest.

The districts of GMA 11 have been spending time recently on outreach, attempting to encourage unprotected counties to participate in the process of setting GMA 11's future conditions. While unprotected counties do not have a vote in what conditions are finalized, they are still invited to give their input.

Rodgers said the task of conserving East Texas' water supply will become more difficult as population numbers grow, but the area shouldn't suffer a water crisis.

"Population figures show that Henderson County is probably going to grow by over 100 percent of its current population in the next 50 years — almost everywhere in East Texas is expected to at least grow by 50 percent during that time — and of course more people means more water is used," he said. "We are going to have plenty of water in East Texas, but in the future we may need to depend more on surface water and less on well water. If you consider the total water available, East Texas has plenty of water, but we won't if we start selling half our water off to Dallas or Houston."

Due to the population boom expected in the coming decades, Rodgers said it is very important East Texas retains its surface water rights.

"We have the water we need, but the future will be heavily dependent on surface water. Groundwater is not going to increase. Increased population growth and expected water-use levels will affect the aquifers in the future. Based on the data we have, we have the water we need; however, the biggest threat to East Texas water is our neighbor to the west," Rodgers said.

Rodgers will report the outcome of Thursday's joint planning meeting to the NTVGCD board of directors at its next meeting.