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The Narrows on the Blanco River.

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Commentary:

Now or Never: It's Time to Address Water Scarcity in Texas

Charles Perry*¹

Editor-in-Chief's Note: In every odd-numbered year, the Texas Legislature convenes in regular session for 140 days. With this in mind, the Texas Water Journal invited Senator Charles Perry, Chairman of the Senate Water, Agriculture, and Rural Affairs Committee to discuss his priorities and visions for Texas water and the regular session of the 89th Texas Legislature. The opinion expressed in this commentary is the opinion of the individual author and not the opinion of the Texas Water Journal or the Texas Water Resources Institute, or the Bureau of Economic Geology.

Keywords: 89th Texas State Legislature, Texas Senate, Texas water policy

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Terms used in paper

Acronym/Initialism	Descriptive Name
SWIFT	State Water Implementation Fund for Texas
SWP	State Water Plan
TAM	Texas Association of Manufacturers
TIRF	Texas Infrastructure Resiliency Fund
TWDB	Texas Water Development Board

There is an old expression in Texas: “You don’t miss the water ‘til the well runs dry.” Without action today, Texas could run dry tomorrow.

In May 2024, the Texas Water Development Board (TWDB) presented population, water usage, and economic growth data from the 2022 State Water Plan (SWP) to the Texas Senate Committee on Water, Agriculture, and Rural Affairs (WARA Committee). The data show that by 2050, Texas will suffer a water shortfall of up to 5.74 million acre-feet per year if faced with drought conditions similar to those the state has experienced over the last few years ([Hearing on Interim Charge, 2024d](#)). The 2022 SWP projects water shortages of up to 6.86 million acre-feet per year by 2070 ([Hearing on Interim Charge, 2024d](#)). Some areas of the state, like South Texas, are already experiencing shortages ([Hearing on Interim Charges, 2024a](#)).

Testimony offered to the WARA Committee by think tanks such as Texas 2036 suggested that the water shortfall has accelerated beyond what the 2022 SWP accounted for since the plan’s publication ([Hearing on Interim Charge, 2024c](#)). Texas 2036 stated that in tandem with the increasing frequency and severity of drought across much of Texas, the water shortages projected in the 2022 SWP are underestimated ([Hearing on Interim Charge, 2024c](#)). I agree, and I personally believe the 2050 and 2070 shortfalls will be over 7 million acre-feet and 10 million acre-feet per year, respectively, if something isn’t done.

Now is the time to develop the water supply needed for both today and tomorrow. A map presented to the WARA Committee by TWDB projected that dozens of Texas communities across the state will face water shortages of more than a quarter of their total needs, if conditions similar to the 1950–1957 drought of record strike again in 2050 ([Hearing on Interim Charge, 2024d](#)). Cities and towns across the state are limiting, if not altogether withholding, development permits over water concerns. In August 2024, the City of Conroe, near Houston, adopted a temporary development moratorium due to water scarcity ([Shaheen, 2024](#)). Local governments in the Rio Grande Valley are discussing the same option ([Muniz, 2024](#)). In Central Texas, permits for water wells and groundwater withdrawals are becoming increasingly contentious as springs and existing wells have run dry in recent years ([Henrickson, 2024](#)).

These shortages touch every sector of Texas’s economy. When TWDB’s data is broken down by water use, the Texas water users most at risk are farmers and ranchers, who need water to irrigate their crops and water livestock; producers of oil, gas, and minerals, who use water in their various extraction processes; power companies, due to their significant dependence on various forms of steam-electric generation; and manufacturers, especially the high tech and petrochemical industries ([Hearing on Interim Charge, 2024d](#)). The impact of continued water scarcity to the Texas economy would be immeasurable.

Already, the proverbial canaries in the coal mine are singing. In the same May 2024 WARA Committee hearing, one farmer testifying on behalf of the Texas Farm Bureau revealed that for the first time in his life, his South Texas farm had no water available for irrigation ([Hearing on Interim Charges, 2024a](#)). In February, Texas’s only sugar mill, located in Santa Rosa, closed for good because of insufficient water supply to sustain sugar cane yields in South Texas ([Hearing on Interim Charges, 2024a](#); [Massey, 2024](#)). Over 600 jobs went with it ([Hearing on Interim Charges, 2024a](#); [Massey, 2024](#)).

The business community is expressing valid concern over water scarcity’s effects on Texas’s future. During the May 2024 WARA Committee hearing, the Texas Association of Manufacturers (TAM) testified that insufficient water supplies may cost Texas up to \$55 billion worth of economic development opportunities and 400,000 manufacturing jobs over the next several decades ([Hearing on Interim Charges, 2024e](#)). TAM pointed out that site selectors—consulting firms from around the country that help major corporations identify potential locations for new industrial facilities—are watching closely to see whether Texas will take action to secure ample and affordable water sufficient to meet future needs ([Hearing on Interim Charges, 2024e](#)). Later in the hearing, the Texas Chemistry Council refined everything down to the point by rightly stating that “the success of [Texas] being able to attract new [petrochemical industry] investment is going to be very dependent on water” ([Hearing on Interim Charges, 2024b](#)).

The facts make it clear. For Texas to sustain the rates of population and economic growth our state has enjoyed the last few decades, we must take action to secure additional water supplies. Fortunately, there is a solution: developing heretofore undeveloped water supplies, adding to the overall volume of water available to Texans.

During the upcoming regular session set to convene in January, the 89th Texas Legislature will have an opportunity to vote for a plan that will supply water to every community, county, and region of the state. The plan will develop new water supply sources, namely via marine desalination along the coast, brackish water desalination across the state, produced water treatment in the West Texas oil and gas fields, and surface water acquisitions where available both in Texas and elsewhere. Make no mistake: All Texans and all industries will benefit from this new water supply plan.

Developing these new water supplies will not be cheap. The new water supply plan will require a large down payment in the form of an appropriation from the surplus the Legislature is expected to enjoy this session. Additionally, there is no dedicated funding stream to support water infrastructure projects in Texas. That is unusual for infrastructure; the State Highway Fund, which supports transportation projects, receives funding from multiple sources dedicated by the Texas Constitution

([Texas Const. art. VIII, §§ 7-a](#); [Texas Const. art. VIII, §§ 7-c](#)). Like transportation infrastructure, new water supply projects will take decades and billions of dollars to fully develop. To bring them to fruition, the Legislature will need to constitutionally dedicate long-term revenue streams to support the implementation of the plan.

Therefore, this session, I will urge my legislative colleagues to: (1) appropriate a large sum toward new water infrastructure projects via the Texas Water Fund; and (2) constitutionally dedicate a recurring revenue stream in support of the Texas Water Fund, similar to those dedicated to the State Highway Fund.

Water is critical to the future of Texas—after all, mankind can neither survive nor thrive without it. No future Texan should go thirsty, no Texas farmer should lose his crop, no Texas employer should lose his business, and no Texas employee should lose his job on account of a lack of water. Water infrastructure is costly and takes years of planning and construction to develop—but it will be more costly and more consequential the longer we wait to get started. To ensure sufficient water supply for our children and grandchildren, and to do so at the lowest possible cost and inconvenience, we must start the work now. There is no more important investment for Texas than to secure the water crucial to its future growth and prosperity.

Texas Senator Charles Perry is a practicing certified public accountant from Lubbock. He was first elected to the Texas Senate in 2014 after serving two terms in the Texas House of Representatives. Senator Perry chairs the Senate Committee on Water, Agriculture, and Rural Affairs and co-chairs the legislative advisory committees for the State Water Implementation Fund for Texas (SWIFT) and the Texas Infrastructure Resiliency Fund (TIRF). Governor Abbott appointed him to the Southwestern States Water Commission and the Western States Water Council. Senator Perry has a Bachelor of Business Administration in accounting and management information systems from Texas Tech University.

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