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Water Planners Floating Several Reservoir Projects

Reservoir projects are inching forward throughout Texas as an answer to the drought, but environmentalists argue that they are unnecessary and expensive.

BY ELENA SCHNEIDER MARCH 4, 2013 6 AM



REPUBLISH



A view of Lake Gilmer in Gilmer, Texas. 📷 Allison V. Smith

Tucked away in Northeast Texas, Lake Gilmer was the last major reservoir built in the state, more than a decade ago. Local officials said they intended to share construction costs and water with a new power plant, but the power company backed out, leaving the city of Gilmer with the bill.

Rather than serve city or industrial customers as a water source, the lake is mostly used for bass fishing.

Despite this cautionary tale, Texas' interest in reservoirs is reviving as the drought persists and growing cities scramble for new water supplies. The state's water planners envision 26 new large reservoirs over the next half-century, at a cost of \$13.6 billion. Though few analysts think all of those will be built, a handful of reservoir proposals are inching forward, according to the Texas Water Development Board.

Reservoirs are an "efficient way to capture storm water," said Thomas Taylor, the executive director of the Upper Trinity Regional Water District, which wants to build a \$270 million reservoir known as Lake Ralph Hall northeast of Dallas. They provide a reliable water supply, he said, adding that many farmers have built mini-reservoirs on their land.

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But environmentalists say reservoirs are unnecessary, expensive and damaging to the land.

"If we build this huge infrastructure and that demand isn't there, that can be a really poor investment," said Myron Hess, manager of the Texas water program for the National Wildlife Federation. He said climate change would bring warmer temperatures and make reservoirs even less worthwhile. Already, more water evaporates out of some major West Texas reservoirs than people use.

Texas saw a surge of reservoir construction in the wake of a devastating drought during the 1950s. But development has slowed because the projects

can span decades and cost hundreds of millions of dollars.

Now reservoirs are gaining interest again. In January, two judges in Austin heard testimony on the Lake Ralph Hall proposal. It was the first such hearing in decades, according to Jason Hill, an attorney with the Austin firm Lloyd Gosselink Rochelle & Townsend, which represents the Upper Trinity Regional Water District. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality is expected to decide this year whether to grant a go-ahead permit. Federal approval is also needed.

In water-starved West Texas, Abilene is moving forward on plans to build a \$240 million reservoir. Midland and San Angelo are also involved. The process of trying to get a permit will probably cost \$12 million and has already dragged on about a decade, according to Mayor Norm Archibald of Abilene.

“We consider that we’re on a marathon race,” Archibald told state lawmakers last month.

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The Lower Colorado River Authority recently approved preliminary plans for a \$206 million reservoir in Wharton County, off the main channel of Texas’ Colorado River. It would benefit rice farmers near the Gulf Coast.

A spokeswoman for Dow Chemical, a chemical manufacturer with facilities in Freeport, said the company has started design and engineering work on a third reservoir to supply its plant.

Kate Galbraith contributed reporting.

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