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SJRA Comments on Drought and Lake Level

Our area is in the midst of a record-breaking drought. While that may sound obvious, the key phrase is “record-breaking.” State water planners use the seven-year drought of the 1950s as the benchmark for all water planning in Texas, and while we are far from matching the overall impact of the 1950s drought, we have set some unfortunate records: June 2011 was the driest month since 1895; October 2010 through July 2011 was the driest period in Texas history; and the current drought is now considered the worst one-year drought ever for Texas.

The key point is that this is an extraordinary and unusual weather pattern. It’s not something you ever “get used to,” but it is something you plan for and do your best to ease the impact. For several years, the SJRA has been actively pursuing plans to help lessen the effects of droughts, and the purpose of this letter is to explain some of those plans and to correct some misperceptions that I’ve read about recently.

One recent letter to the editor stated that while Lake Conroe is a water supply reservoir, it was intended “to be used only in time of extreme drought.” This is not a correct statement, but it’s a pretty good description of how state planners view reservoir “storage.” Texas reservoirs are assigned an annual yield, which is the amount of water that’s allowed to be used each year for water supply. Even in years of below-average rainfall, most reservoirs will remain close to full because their annual yield is limited; but reservoir “storage” is designed to be used during times of drought. This means that water levels will drop during extremely dry periods as the stored water is used to get us through the drought, but then levels return to normal when the drought breaks. The conditions we’re seeing now will not be an “everyday event” or the

“new norm.” For additional details, see the lake level article at the top of our home page at www.sjra.net.

To help minimize impacts on lake levels, the SJRA has been pursuing several strategies. First, the SJRA has recently approved agreements with Willis and Montgomery County Utility District #2 to install wells into the Catahoula Aquifer, a deeper aquifer than we currently use. Water use from the Catahoula directly offsets water that would otherwise be needed from Lake Conroe. The SJRA is working with other participants in its surface water program to encourage additional Catahoula wells.

In addition, water conservation and drought restrictions can help reduce impacts on water supplies, so we are implementing an award-winning conservation education program and working with our customer utilities to implement drought restrictions. Even though the need to conserve our supplies is greater than ever during times of drought, water use typically INCREASES. Water conservation must become a way of life.

Another common request has been that the SJRA pursue alternative water supplies – either in addition to the supplies in Lake Conroe or in lieu of them. The SJRA has been actively pursuing additional water supplies for many years, including the potential of using water from the Trinity River. At some point, Montgomery County will need additional water; it’s just a question of when and at what cost. However, the cost to develop additional water supplies is substantial. The capital cost for the pumps and pipeline to bring water from the Trinity River is approximately \$300 million, and the water would cost approximately \$5 million per year if we used only 50,000 acre-feet. It’s not that this project won’t move forward – at some point it has to – but right now there is very little consensus to pay these kinds of costs for water that may not be needed for decades. Droughts are temporary, but these costs accrue every year.

Right now, as Neil Fogle correctly pointed out in two recent letters to the editor, this money is better spent on reuse and conservation. These efforts alone won’t solve the problem or “create a surplus,” but they can make a substantial difference in how fast water is needed from Lake Conroe. The Woodlands has been reusing treated effluent for many years to irrigate several golf courses, to supplement Lake Woodlands, and to replenish the Waterway. The SJRA recently signed a contract to increase the amount of reuse for golf courses in The Woodlands, and the City of Conroe is also working on several ambitious reuse projects.

Extreme droughts like we are currently experiencing create hardships for all of us, but these hardships are temporary. While it's not possible to avoid all impacts, the SJRA will continue to work with local community leaders to put into action every reasonable strategy to help lessen the impact of droughts.

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