

Supplying Oklahoma's water needs will be difficult, costly

It is expected to cost \$87 billion for improvements to meet Oklahoma's drinking water needs over the next 50 years, according to draft sections of the Oklahoma Comprehensive Water Plan currently being circulated in the state.

BY RANDY ELLIS  0

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It is expected to cost \$87 billion for improvements to meet Oklahoma's drinking water needs over the next 50 years.

That's roughly 13 times Oklahoma's entire state budget. That includes the money to build, replace and expand water plants, pumps, wells and water lines, but doesn't include any new reservoirs that might be built.

Figuring out a way to pay for those improvements is one of many challenges that must be overcome if Oklahomans are to continue to enjoy safe and reliable water supplies, according to draft sections of a 50-year water plan scheduled for release in 2012.

Oklahomans also will have to figure out fairly quickly how to deal with 12 "hot spot" watershed basins in western Oklahoma where significant water supply challenges are likely to develop within the next 10 years, the draft report indicates.

For years, Oklahomans have been anxiously awaiting completion and publication of the latest update of the Oklahoma Comprehensive Water Plan — a massive compilation of research and recommendations that state leaders are counting on to help answer several questions critical to the state's future.

Among the most pressing:

- Are Oklahomans likely to experience water shortages over the next 50 years? If so, where?
- How can Oklahomans possibly pay for \$87 billion in needed water infrastructure improvements?
- Should new reservoirs be built? What would be the best locations?
- Do Oklahoma Indian tribes have legitimate claims to water rights in various parts of the state?
- Should Oklahoma sell water to Texas?

Simple questions, but the answers are complex.

TRANSFER SYSTEM

A 1980 water study raised the possibility of Oklahoma developing a massive water transfer system to move water from reservoirs in eastern Oklahoma where water is relatively plentiful to locations in western Oklahoma where water is scarce.

That report immediately created a furor. Southeastern Oklahoma political leaders complained such a system would deplete southeastern municipal and industrial water supplies and cause downturns in the economy of an already depressed area. Oklahomans throughout the state objected to the high cost — about \$11 billion in 1978 dollars.

The idea of a statewide water transfer system failed to gain traction.

Oklahoma City, however, did take steps to secure future water supplies from southeastern Oklahoma — creating a furor of its own in the process.

Oklahoma City entered into a \$42 million deal with the state last June to purchase storage rights to 90 percent of the water in southeastern Oklahoma's Sardis Lake.

The Chickasaw Nation and the Choctaw Nation protested, contending the water rights weren't the state's to sell.

LAWSUITS

Tribal leaders contend their tribes own water rights in the area stemming from treaties that predate statehood, and they should be a part of any negotiations and agreements to sell water in the region. The tribes have warned that a federal lawsuit may be filed if state and city officials continue to fail to negotiate with them.

Meanwhile, a North Texas water district already is suing the Oklahoma Water Resources Board in federal court.

Fast-growing cities in the Dallas-Fort Worth area that face looming water shortages would like to pay millions of dollars to purchase billion of gallons of Oklahoma water before it reaches the Red River.

Oklahoma is separated from Texas by the Red River. Once water flows from Oklahoma streams into the Red River it becomes too salty to drink without expensive treatment.

Oklahoma lawmakers in 2009 voted to ban out-of-state water sales until the Oklahoma Water Resources Board determines whether the state has extra water beyond what is needed to meet its own needs.

Some Oklahoma leaders oppose selling water to Texas, even if there is extra, because plentiful water promotes economic development, and they would rather see the

economy improve in Oklahoma than Texas.

FINAL REPORT

In the midst of this atmosphere of controversy, litigation and uncertainty, Oklahoma political leaders have pointed to the anticipated publication of the 2012 update to the Oklahoma Comprehensive Water Plan as a document that should provide some clarity to Oklahoma's water situation.

Draft documents indicate that some, but not all, of Oklahoma's major water issues are likely to be addressed in the final report, which is due to be published in 2012 by the Oklahoma Water Resources Board.

Some lawmakers already have voiced dissatisfaction with the study, saying it fails to address the needs of water for recreation and that a company hired to do technical studies had a conflict of interest.

Articles inside today's *Oklahoman* will explore what draft sections of the report have to say about some of the most important water issues facing the state.

ONLINE

Citizens who want to know more about water plans for their areas, or who want to provide personal input, can go to the Oklahoma Water Resources Board's website, www.owrb.ok.gov/.

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