

OPINION

OUR VIEWS | STATE REPORT DUE THIS FALL

Water may trump all as hot-button issue for state

OKLAHOMA will need bold, forward-looking leadership in crafting policy that addresses the state's water needs for the next 50-plus years. Don't expect that to come from politicians in southeastern Oklahoma.

The noise being made by a cohort of Little Dixie Democrats over the state's 50-year water plan, which hasn't even officially been released yet, reflects the mindset of many elected officials regarding water in that region. In short: We don't want it to go anywhere.

That has come through loud and clear as entities in Texas have sought to buy some of the millions of gallons of surplus water that now spills out of our state. Access to that water would help cities in north Texas continue to grow, which in turn would benefit southern and southeastern Oklahoma, as has happened the past several years. Yet the notion of selling water to big, bad Texas is unthinkable for some.

Sen. Jerry Ellis, D-Valliant, has been among the most vocal protectionists. "Growth will go where the water goes, that's a fact," Ellis said last year after a Texas water district lost a court challenge regarding the state's moratorium on out-of-state sales. "I want to bring the jobs to the water and not the water to the jobs."

Ellis resorted to an old standby, class envy, in wailing last year about Oklahoma City's efforts to gain access to

water from Sardis Lake. "To transfer a valuable natural resource from a poor area to a rich area is nothing short of regional discrimination," he said.

No surprise, Ellis is among those trying to derail the Oklahoma Comprehensive Water Plan before it's even released. He believes an engineering firm that did much of the work on the plan had a conflict of interest because it also was involved in the Sardis Lake issue.

He and state Sen. Richard Lerblance are seeking an attorney general's opinion on that point. "We've got some legitimate concerns about that," Lerblance said. Meanwhile, state Reps. Ed Cannaday and Brian Renegar want the AG to explore whether the water plan complies with the Legislature's mandate to look at all uses of water. They contend that nonconsumptive uses of water, for such things as recreation, were overlooked.

Again, the full report hasn't even been released yet. That's expected to happen this fall, when the Oklahoma Water Resources Board will vote on whether to adopt it and send it to the Legislature for consideration.

Once it gets to the Legislature, look out. If you think criminal justice or immigration or tax credits are hot-button topics, wait until water's on the agenda. No doubt Ellis & Co. will only intensify their efforts to ensure that little or nothing gets done on this vitally important issue.