


Oklahoma's 50-year water plan draws criticism from lawmakers

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Ed Canaday, D-Porum

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Debbie Ragan, public information and marketing manager for the Oklahoma City utilities department

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“It was supposed to be a comprehensive water study encompassing all the needs of Oklahoma water users, but it totally disregarded the role of nonconsumptive uses of water for things like tourism and recreation,” said state [Rep. Ed Cannaday, D-Porum](#).

State [Rep. Brian Renegar, D-Blanco](#), said lawmakers also believe the study of aquifers in the water plan was incomplete. He said that was unacceptable in a state where many people live in areas where aquifers are the sole source of water.

The lawmakers also question whether an engineering firm that did a lot of work for the state water plan had a conflict of interest.

CDM, a [Massachusetts](#)-based engineering firm, had an \$850,000 contract with the [Oklahoma City Water Utilities Trust](#) and other central Oklahoma water trusts to study obtaining and pumping in water from [Sardis Lake](#) in southeastern Oklahoma. At the same time, CDM was being paid millions of dollars for what was supposed to be unbiased work on the 50-year water plan that included trying to determine whether there was surplus water available in southeastern Oklahoma for sale to places like Oklahoma City or [Texas](#), legislative critics said.

“We've got some legitimate concerns about that,” said state [Sen. Richard Lerblance, D-Hartshorne](#).

Opinion requested

Cannaday, Lerblance, Renegar and state [Sen. Jerry Ellis, D-Valliant](#), have requested an attorney general's opinion on whether CDM had a conflict of interest and whether the draft 50-year water plans fails to comply with a legislative mandate to consider all uses of water.

The request for an attorney general's opinion is under review, said [Diane Clay](#), spokeswoman for the agency.

J.D. Strong, executive director of the [Oklahoma Water Resources Board](#), said he is a little perplexed by the lawmakers' complaints about the study that was overseen by his agency.

“Just looking at the water plan as a whole, there clearly is extensive information about nonconsumptive uses of water for things like recreation and fishing,” Strong said.

Strong said the study includes recommendations that stream flows be measured better so the natural beauty and recreational uses of streams and lakes can be protected.

Aquifers and ground water are extensively discussed in sections of the report that deal with meeting the current and future water needs of people who live in various regions of the state, he said.

Strong also defended the work of CDM.

“I don't see any conflict of interest on the work they've done on the water plan,” Strong said.

There is “no recommendation or even a suggestion” in the state water plan that water needs to be moved in from Sardis Lake to meet the long-term water needs of central Oklahoma, Strong said.

Water resources

In fact, there is quite a bit of discussion in the state report about better utilizing ground water resources in central Oklahoma as opposed to bringing in water from outside the basin, he said.

[Debbie Ragan](#), public information and marketing manager for the Oklahoma City utilities department, said officials looked at the potential for bias before selecting CDM.

“CDM was selected through a professional services process,” she said. “They were selected because they presented the best ideas for identifying options and determining costs and water rate impacts for 11 different partners in the study. We discussed possible conflict of interest at some length when they were selected.”

CDM officials did not return telephone calls seeking comment Friday

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