

DROUGHT PLANNING: MAKING THE BEST OF A DIFFICULT SITUATION

Talking about the weather can be downright depressing these days. Most of Texas has received very little rain since the fall of 2010 and the forecast show the drought will likely continuing well into 2012.



You might wonder what is being done to ensure people will continue to have access to water until the weather improves. The Brazos River Authority has a Drought Contingency Plan that is designed to work, with efforts by other state and local officials, to manage water during times of scarcity.

To understand how water in our lakes and rivers is managed in a drought, it might be helpful to know how surface water rights are determined in Texas. Generally, long-term perpetual surface water rights are based on the date they were established. That “priority date” determines your place in line to use the water. Normally, this doesn’t matter, but during drought and other periods of shortage, one’s priority date become’s very important.



For instance, say there is a drought and you need water, someone downriver who has an earlier priority date, known as a senior right, can insist you do not take water until their rights are fulfilled. Those with rights junior to yours, or more recent, cannot make such demands. However, you can insist junior rights upstream hold off until you get the water allotted by your permit.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) oversees these rights. Last May, a senior right holder in the lower Brazos River basin placed a “senior call” to TCEQ indicating that due to the drought it was not able to get the water that should have been available under its senior right. Subsequent to the “senior call,” TCEQ suspended water diversions by some upstream junior water right holders, except for municipal and industrial use.

The Brazos River Authority also has surface water rights from which it contracts with various entities and businesses who wish to withdraw water from the Brazos, its lakes and tributaries. The Authority maintains a Drought Contingency Plan (DCP) that dictates how it manages and operates during times of drought.. Under the DCP, required by TCEQ, each Authority system reservoir and the system as a whole have “trigger” points. If a lake level or the amount of water in the system falls below a trigger point, Authority officials may implement appropriate stages of the DCP. You can see a chart of the most recent lake levels and current drought status by clicking [here](#).



These trigger points can prompt Authority officials to call for one of three alert stages, depending on the water level: Drought Watch, Drought Warning and Drought Emergency.

A Stage 1 Drought Watch is meant to raise public awareness about potential drought problems. Customers are recommended to practice voluntary water conservation measures. If the water level continues to fall, that can trigger declaration of a Stage 2 Drought Warning. This stage calls for efforts to reduce water use by 3 percent or more. Authority officials can ask water customers to begin voluntary or mandatory restrictions on water use, including on landscaping.

Finally, in the case of a severe drop in water levels, the Authority can move to Stage 3 Drought Emergency status, which has a goal of at least a 7 percent reduction in water use. In addition to the steps in the other drought stages, Authority officials can ask customers to begin mandatory water use restrictions for their



customers, including prohibiting of hosing paved areas, use of ornamental fountains, washing cars, filling swimming pools and prohibiting planting new landscaping, among other limitations. These restrictions require BRA officials to notify TCEQ.

As of the end of 2011, the entire Brazos River Authority system was at at Stage 1 Drought Watch. Lakes Limestone, Georgetown and Proctor were at Stage 2 Drought Warning. Lake Somerville continues to be listed as Stage 3 Drought Emergency.

With dry conditions expected to continue into the summer, reservoir levels may decline and could reach additional trigger levels, requiring further actions under the DCP. To view the Authority Drought Contingency page, including current reservoir and system status, please click the link [here](#).