

TCEQ approves Lake Ralph Hall permit

By Wendy Hundley

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The Texas Commission for Environmental Quality on Tuesday approved construction of the first major water supply reservoir authorized in Texas in almost 30 years.

The agency's decision on Lake Ralph Hall culminates a permitting process that began a decade ago by the Lewisville-based Upper Trinity Regional Water District.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers must now sign off on the reservoir that would cover more than 11,000 acres in southeastern Fannin County, about 80 miles northeast of Dallas. Corps approval is expected to come in the next two years.

Environmentalists and Upper Trinity member Flower Mound, who have been critical of the project, also could file a request to have the TCEQ decision reviewed.

And funding for the lake is likely dependent on Texas voter approval of a constitutional amendment in November.

The reservoir is expected to be completed by 2025.

Lake Ralph Hall, named after the longtime Texas Republican congressman from Rockwall, will supply 30 to 45 million gallons of water a day for the region.

"I am honored that they would want to name a lake after me," the 90-year-old legislator said in an e-mail. "Texas is in desperate need of water, so I am pleased that the TCEQ is moving forward with this."

Officials echoed the need for a dependable water source to fuel the region's economy.

Most of the reservoirs that serve North Texas were built in the 1960s as a result of extended drought in the 1950s. Recent droughts combined with continued population growth have forced water districts and cities to restrict use, especially during the summer.

"Lake Ralph Hall will help provide a reliable water supply to families and businesses in the North Texas region for many generations," Thomas Taylor, executive director of the water district, said in a prepared statement.

Upper Trinity supplies wholesale water to more than 25 municipalities and utilities in Denton County and parts of Dallas and Collin counties.

Ballot item addresses water projects

The commission's decision comes weeks before Texans go to the polls on Nov. 5 to vote on a constitutional amendment to address the state's long-term water needs.

Proposition 6, one of nine proposed amendments, would provide \$2 billion to finance State Water Plan projects over the next 50 years.

Lake Ralph Hall is one of 26 major reservoirs proposed for Texas. It's one of four recommended for Region C, which covers all or parts of 16 counties in North Texas.

About 26 percent of the state's population lived in Region C in 2010. The region's population is expected to grow 96 percent to more than 13 million by 2060, according to the plan.

In those 50 years, water demands will increase 86 percent, while the total water supply will decline by 3 percent, the plan said.

The commission's actions may signal that Texas is poised for an expansion of water reservoirs.

The last time the agency issued a permit for a major reservoir was in 1985 for the planned Lake Columbia near the East Texas town of Troup, commissioners were told Tuesday.

"For many decades, Texans have essentially been living off the largess of the visionary leaders of the first half of the last century. It is time to move forward with a new phase of water supply development in Texas," Sen. Troy Fraser, R-Horseshoe Bay, and Rep. Allan Ritter, D-Nederland, wrote in a joint statement read to the commission.

"Today's action signals to everyone that this water plan is for real. It's not just a hollow piece of paper," Taylor said after the commission hearing.

Funding for lake unclear

Lake Ralph Hall is expected to cost \$286 million. But it's unclear how it will be funded.

The Texas Water Development Board in 2008 provided \$10.4 million for planning and permitting costs for the project. But officials say no additional funds have been earmarked.

As a project designated in the state water plan, Lake Ralph Hall would be eligible for funding authorized by Proposition 6.

"The funding is still up in the air since the constitutional amendment hasn't passed," Taylor said.

He expressed optimism that voters will ratify the amendment.

If that happens, "we'll be applying for our share of it, but the guidelines are not fully known yet," Taylor said.

He said any state funding would have to be fully repaid by the district.

Flower Mound officials have maintained that there are more economical sources of water and estimates that the lake could cost as much as \$450 million, causing water rates to skyrocket.

“The rate impacts are certainly a real consideration for the citizens of Flower Mound,” Ken Parr, the town’s public works director, told the commission on Tuesday.

Upper Trinity officials have estimated that rates eventually will increase 8 percent to 15 percent to pay for the lake.

The project has also drawn opposition from environmentalists who have criticized Upper Trinity for having a weak water conservation plan.

Commissioners rejected those arguments, saying the district’s water conservation plan is based on the state water board’s best management practices.

The commissioners also noted that the district provides wholesale water. Its retail customers, including towns and cities, are responsible for developing their own water conservation plans.

LAKE RALPH HALL PERMITTING TIMELINE

1989 - The Upper Trinity Regional Water District is created to address regional water needs

2003 - The district submits a water use permit application for Lake Ralph Hall

2006 – Public meetings held in Lewisville and Ladonia

2006 – State environmental officials begin environmental, conservation and hydrology studies on the project

June 25 – The State Office of Administrative Hearings finds that the water district has met all statutory and regulatory requirements. It recommends approval of the water use permit

Sept. 24 – The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality approves a water-right permit to construct and maintain a dam and reservoir known as Lake Ralph Hall. Opponents can submit a motion for commissioners to review their decision.

Nov. 5 – Texas voters take up constitutional amendment that could provide funding for the reservoir

2014-15 – U.S. Army Corps of Engineers expected to sign off on plan

2025 – Lake Ralph Hall expected to be complete and supply water