
NATIONAL RESOURCES

Two battles for U.S. water development

by Nicholas F. Benton

A major battle in the fight to open up U.S. water development comes to a head in Texas Nov. 3 when a unique proposition to create a state water trust fund appears on the state ballot. Spearheaded by Texas House Speaker Bill Clayton, a Democrat, and endorsed by Texas Gov. William Clements, a Republican, Proposition 4 is an amendment to the state Constitution that is designed to utilize the tax base of a growing region to crack through the national fiscal and political roadblocks which have stalled virtually all new water development since 1976.

Clayton's initiative in Texas is one of two complementary campaigns toward vastly expanding the nation's water supplies. The Texas ballot effort, which was endorsed last spring by National Democratic Policy Committee (NDPC) Chairman Warren Hamerman, is complemented by a broader national campaign initiated by the NDPC to revive the 1960s push to bring massive new water supplies from Alaska and Canada into the "lower 48" states. Both the Clayton Plan and the NDPC's efforts to revive the plan known as the North American Water and Power Alliance (NAWAPA) were launched in response to the imminent threat of water shortages in some of America's most important agricultural areas.

Texas is one of six states whose highly developed agricultural productivity faces devastation as a result of depletion of a major ground-water aquifer, the Ogallala. Half the nation's cattle stocks and 22 percent of its agricultural exports come from the region—covering the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles, western Kansas and Nebraska, and eastern Colorado and New Mexico—whose only source of water for irrigation is the Ogallala Aquifer. The discovery that the huge aquifer was being depleted at an alarming rate led Congress in 1976 to create the High Plains Study Council, to conduct a \$6 million study of possible remedies for the problem.

As a vehicle for action, the study was crippled at its outset by Sen. Henry Jackson (D-Wash.), who amended the original legislation so as to restrict the inquiry to transfer of water from the Missouri and Arkansas Rivers (thus eliminating the NAWAPA option). As an *EIR* survey made on Capitol Hill in late October confirmed, any Council recommendation for transfer of water from

those two rivers faces certain rejection.

A look at the preliminary report prepared for the Council in August suggests why. The combined claims of the upstream and downstream states on the waters of the Missouri and the Arkansas would preclude any large-scale diversion, the report says. The quantities thus available to the High Plains states would be inadequate for the development needs of the region, and the costs in any case would be prohibitive—in one estimate running as high as \$2,000 per acre-foot for water by the time it reaches farms in western Texas.

Clayton's ballot measure, however, offers a partial alternative. Opposed by the Sierra Club and the League of Women Voters (who would deceive voters into thinking it will create new taxes) the measure sets aside a percentage of the state's annual budget surplus for underwriting, at moderate interest rates, bond issues for regional water projects throughout the state. This is a shrewd maneuver to bypass the high interest-rate regime, which is wiping out the markets for development bonds and accomplishing the environmentalists' depopulation-through-underdevelopment policy.

Clayton's Proposition 4 measure will be decided by the vote in Houston, where the only large turnout of voters in the state is expected Nov. 3 due to a four-way mayoral race. There, the NDPC is adding its efforts to those of the "Water for Texas" committee headed by Austin Mayor Carol McClellan to win passage of the measure.

Although Houston differs from the Texas Panhandle in overall rainfall, it is no less in need of water development. Growing rapidly, it is now the nation's fourth largest city. Upgraded flood control and water and sewage-treatment plants are urgently needed. Proposition 4 will be approved if its proponents can get this point across to Houston voters.

Meanwhile, on Oct. 6, thirteen members of the High Plains Study Council attended a forum on NAWAPA held by the NDPC in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Those attending included four state senators from three states, two representatives of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and senior water-resource department representatives from two states. Aware of the failure of their study, now virtually complete, four members of the Council, led by Republican State Rep. Keith Farrar, have responded to the NDPC initiative to make a national scandal of the Ogallala depletion, and to revive NAWAPA as the only viable solution from both an economic and political standpoint.

The original NAWAPA study established the feasibility from an engineering standpoint of every dam, ditch, tunnel, and pump required to divert a fabulous volume of water and surplus hydroelectric power from the headwaters of the Yukon, Tanana, and Peace rivers into productive use from Canada to Mexico.

Who would benefit from the NAWAPA program

The North American Water and Power Alliance (NAWAPA) is the most comprehensive of a number of plans developed during the 1950s and 1960s to deliver water from Alaska and Canada to the lower 48 states. Completed in 1964 by the Ralph M. Parsons Company of Pasadena, California, it was the subject of a report on Western Water Development prepared by the Senate Public Works Committee's Special Subcommittee on Western Water Development, chaired by Utah Republican Frank Moss in 1966.

The estimated cost at the time was \$80 billion. Within five years after commencing construction, the project would begin to pay for itself with the sale of surplus water and hydroelectric power. Its full completion would take 30 years.

NAWAPA promises 80 million acre-feet of water a year and 30,000 megawatts of surplus hydroelectric power to the United States; 58 million acre-feet a year of water and 38,000 megawatts of hydroelectric to Canada; and 20 million acre-feet annually and 2,000 megawatts of hydroelectric to Mexico. By way of comparison, the U.S. presently consumes a total of 160 million acre-feet of water per year.

The virtue of the NAWAPA plan is its continent-wide approach, which not only heightens its political value by making it attractive to diverse regions, but exploits the benefits of grand-scale water diversion to the maximum.

The regional benefits include:

- **Alaska:** Water is diverted from the Yukon, Tanana, Peace, and other rivers in Alaska and the Canadian Yukon Territory. Although the water diverted from Alaska would be less than 20 percent of the total flows in the affected areas, Alaska itself would receive the equivalent of two and a half 1,000 megawatt nuclear power plants in surplus hydroelectric power.

- **Canada:** The gathered water would flow southward into a natural geological formation known as the Rocky Mountain Trench, containing the upper reaches of the Columbia and Fraser Rivers. Dammed off, this 500-mile long, 6-mile wide gorge would hold 450 million acre-feet of water in storage. As a gigantic artificial lake adjacent to Banff and Jasper National Parks, it would attract tremendous recreational devel-

opment in the region. Water from this reservoir would then flow south into the United States and eastward through Canada, enabling the massive expansion of irrigation in the Canadian agricultural belt, and allowing for the construction of a navigable waterway extending from the Great Lakes to the Pacific Ocean (at last, the Northwest Passage!).

- **Pacific Northwest:** As opposed to "stealing" water from the Columbia River, NAWAPA would benefit the basin by regulating flows in the Columbia and Fraser River systems which presently are characterized by the tremendous seasonal river variations. The storage capacity of the NAWAPA reservoirs would regulate the flow of the Columbia River system to double the hydroelectric power-generating capacity of the system.

- **California-Arizona:** Presently supplied by the Colorado River, this region faces a severe water crisis as the quality of the Colorado water progressively deteriorates, and continued growth in the region stretches the existing supply beyond the limit. This will be felt even more dramatically upon completion of the Central Arizona Project, which will draw heavily upon the Colorado. NAWAPA will supply 11 million acre-feet annually each to California and Arizona (compared to the total of 46 million acre-feet presently used there), thus not only addressing the impending crisis, but also allowing for the flowering of the desertified Southwest beyond our present imagination.

- **Mexico:** The 20 million acre-feet of water delivered to northwestern Mexico alone would allow that country to irrigate eight times as much new land as the Aswan Dam allows Egypt.

- **The High Plains:** The depletion of the Ogallala Aquifer—the primary water supply for 11 million acres of the nation's most critical agricultural land—threatens the nation's economy more than any other single water problem. When NAWAPA was first developed, awareness of this problem did not exist; therefore, projected water delivery to this region (especially to western Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas) was not made a priority in the study. However, modifications in an update of the study would easily provide an ample surplus to this region.

- **The Great Lakes:** The flow of 40 million acre-feet per year of water through the navigable diversion canal extending across Canada from the Rocky Mountain Trench to the Great Lakes would alleviate falling levels and pollution in the Great Lakes, and would augment the power potential of the Niagara and St. Lawrence Rivers.