

Armbrister: Brownsville desal project will help entire state

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AUSTIN - It was Texas Desalination Day at the Capitol Wednesday, and Gov. Rick Perry's legislative director used the occasion to call for more funding for the state's first seawater desalination pilot project.

Ken Armbrister, a former state senator from Victoria, made his comments as keynote speaker at the Texas Water Conservation Association's 63rd annual convention.

"We hope to add additional funding," said Armbrister, referring to the Lower Rio Grande Regional Seawater Desalination Project, which is located next to the Brownsville Ship Channel.

"If you think about it, what is going to occur there, the answers that we receive at that project, does, in fact, have statewide ramifications."

Armbrister also gave the keynote speech at a ribbon-cutting for the Brownsville facility on February 23. The 12-month pilot plant study will assess desalination equipment performance and collect site-specific water quality data that will be used to design a full-scale plant.

The study is jointly funded by a \$1.3 million grant from the Texas Water Development Board and approximately \$900,000 from the Brownsville Public Utilities Board.

In an interview with the *Guardian* after his speech, Armbrister said that with more dollars, the Brownsville facility would help "get us where we need to be" in testing new technologies.

"The research being done is going to be applicable not just to the Rio Grande Valley but statewide so we can do an analysis to see how it could work for a Dallas," Armbrister said.

The Texas Water Conservation Association's convention included a session on desalination, with the Brownsville project highlighted.

"Our project is good for the entire state, not just Brownsville," said John Bruciak, president of the South Central Membrane Association and general manager of the Brownsville Public Utilities Board.

"We are excited the state is behind us. We want to share information with everyone in the state and the country and make this a successful project."

Bruciak said the Brownsville facility needed around \$130 million to be fully operational. He said if the project received about \$70 million in grant assistance from the state, the project could really move forward.

"We would need money to do designs and further testing. It would be nice if we got a large sum to start the construction," Bruciak said. "We really can't start ten years from now. We have to start now and in ten years we will have everything taken care of."

Eduardo A. Campirano, assistant general manager of Brownsville PUB, said the state was projecting that in 50 years, 53 percent of the Texas population would live within one and a half miles of the Gulf Coast.

Campirano said that spoke to the importance of developing seawater desalination plants such as Brownsville's.

"The great thing about the location of the Brownsville project is that it is truly in an area of the state where there is a need for water. It is not supplementing an existing supply," Campirano told the *Guardian*.

"It can also be an international project. The problems of South Texas as it relates to water are just as great if not magnified more in northern Tamaulipas. Truly, the project has a lot of upside in a lot of ways."

Campirano said the pressing need to address an impending water shortage would force people to "get to the table and talk."

According to the Texas Water Development Board, the state's projected population growth – from 21 million to 46 million by the year 2060 – will fuel a 27 percent increase in water demand.

Meanwhile, the agency says, water supplies will decrease by 18 percent, primarily because of accumulating sediments in reservoirs and depletion of aquifers.

The TWDB believes desalination offers a viable, drought-proof solution to the state's water problems because some 2.7 billion acre feet of brackish groundwater is contained in Texas aquifers and an inexhaustible supply of seawater in the Gulf of Mexico.

In his luncheon speech, Armbrister said legislation from former Sen. Buster Brown to decentralize the management of water to 16 regional authorities was "one of the best" things Texas had ever done legislatively.

Armbrister said the state's 50-year plan had identified clear needs and projects. "We've got pretty good documents," he said.

The one "glaring problem," Armbrister said, was that no methodology had been established to pay for it. He pointed out that in 2000 the state's plan had identified \$98 billion in water needs.

"Various attempts have been made to try to figure out how are we going to fund what is now probably closer to \$102 billion, what with inflation and costs," he said. "How are we going to pay for any of those things on there? I think that is the number one water concern of the Legislature right now."

Armbrister said those who believe the state's water shortages will be solved by simply building more reservoirs are mistaken. "Reservoirs in and of themselves are not necessarily the answer," he said.