

Desalination spurs calls for regulations



A heron flies along the La Quinta Channel off Corpus Christi Bay at Portland. The first and only permitted seawater desalination plant in Texas is the city of Corpus Christi's Inner Harbor Water Treatment Campus.

Groups fear for health of areas tied to tourism, wildlife

By Megan Kimble
AUSTIN BUREAU

In an effort to shore up Texas' future water supply, legislators have stressed the need to secure new sources and point to desalination as a potential solution to looming shortages. But environmentalists, coastal residents and some legislators caution that without stronger regulation, the build-out of half a dozen proposed desalination plants threatens to harm coastal bays and estuaries that drive tourism and host dozens of endangered species.

"If we want seawater desalination to be our long-term water supply strategy, we better do it right," said Eugenia Spears, the water program coordinator at the Sierra Club Lone Star Chapter.

Seawater desalination, which removes salt to produce potable water, leaves behind a concentrated brine that must be disposed of, usually back into the ocean. Experts say the salty discharge can disrupt the balance of the surrounding ecosystem, but the state has few rules and regulations governing its disposal.

Current regulation requires only that salinity levels in estuaries are maintained to support "aquatic life uses" but doesn't define what that means or establish numerical standards.

The Sierra Club and other environ-

"Given the pace of permit approvals for seawater desalination plants and the ever-pressing water needs in Texas, we need clear salinity standards right now."

Eugenia Spears, Sierra Club Lone Star Chapter's water program coordinator

mental groups have called for regulation that would require desalination plants to dispose of brine farther offshore, at least 3 miles into the Gulf of Mexico, where it can more easily mix with ocean water.

Much of Texas' coastline is protected by barrier islands, which create a series of bays isolated from larger ocean currents. Within many of those bays are estuaries, home to delicate ecosystems that thrive in the brackish water where rivers meet the ocean.

Some House lawmakers filed proposals this session meant to force the state to adopt stronger standards around salinity, but their efforts have made little headway.

The first and only permitted seawater desalination plant in Texas is the city of Corpus Christi's Inner Harbor Water Treatment Campus, which is

expected to break ground this year and could discharge up to 51.5 million gallons of concentrated brine daily into the Corpus Christi Ship Channel. At least four more desalination projects are proposed to go online in Corpus Christi within the next decade.

The city of Corpus Christi has said that the Inner Harbor project will have a "negligible" impact on aquatic life, and the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality approved the city's discharge permit in March. But many experts say the briny discharge would hurt Corpus Christi Bay and potentially create "dead zones" for fish and other marine life.

Gov. Greg Abbott, who appoints all three TCEQ commissioners, has made water a top priority this legislative session, and the House and Senate have advanced legislation that would carve out \$1 billion annually from the state's tax revenue for water supply and infrastructure.

State Sen. Charles Perry, a Lubbock Republican leading the water push, wants 80% of that funding to be earmarked for new water supply projects, even as the House has favored giving full flexibility to the Texas Water Development Board, which oversees state water planning, to allocate according to priority and need.

If Perry gets his way, hundreds of millions of dollars could flow directly to desalination plants from Corpus

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Voters reject right-wing school board candidates

Backlash to U.S. politics, culture warfare blamed

By Elizabeth Sander
STAFF WRITER

Several conservative candidates with right-wing support lost their bids for Houston-area school boards last week, a change that some experts said could reflect dissatisfaction with the current state of national politics.

Even though school boards are supposed to be nonpartisan entities, many ultra-conservative candidates have been elected with support from outside political organizations and large private donations, leading to book bans, censorship of instructional material and restrictive gender policies. In Katy, Fort Bend and other districts across Texas, trustees who supported those conservative policies, lost their bids for re-election.

"You could call it a kind of a mini-reactionary bump. ... A lot of voters may choose to go vote because this is the only way that they can show their displeasure at the current moment," University of Houston political science professor Brandon Rottinghaus said. "(It's) a global factor that would definitely produce

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Cuts muddy future for A&M farm projects

USDA cancels funding for climate-smart crops

By Samantha Ketterer
STAFF WRITER

Texas A&M AgriLife Research received its largest competitive grant in history in 2023. About two years later, the \$65 million award was terminated, according to a government spending database.

The decision came last month as the U.S. Department of Agriculture slashed a \$3.1 billion Biden-era program known as Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities. The agency called the nationwide research and teaching effort a "slush fund," and Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins dubbed it a mission of the "green new scam" — yet agricultural sustainability advocates decried the end of the project as one that could have long-term effects on America's food supply.

Researchers have remained silent about the cuts, hoping to recoup some funding under refocused government initiatives. In the meantime, advocates

A&M continues on A2

Houston's growth in question if Trump stifles immigration

By Sam González Kelly
STAFF WRITER

Houston is one of the fastest-growing urban areas in the country. Its booming population makes the region a dynamic cultural hub and an attractive destination for business.

But Houston's rapid growth has come under threat from President Donald Trump's stringent immigration policies, which have already slowed entries into the country. More than most other major cities, Houston has relied heavily on international migration for its population increases.

Stifling the main source of Houston's growth could present the city with serious questions

about its future.

"I think there's a moment right now where it really is unclear the degree to which Houston will be able to maintain itself and its status as an economic powerhouse because of some of the threats that exist around the people who make up the city," said Dan Potter, director of the Houston Population Research Center at Rice University's Kinder Institute for Urban Research.

Roughly half of the greater Houston area's growth since 2020 is attributable to international migration, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The rest of the area's growth has come from domestic migration, which refers to people who

moved here from within the United States, and natural change, which is the difference between births and deaths.

Closer to the urban core, however, immigrants make up more and more of Houston's growth. In Harris County, international migration accounted for 93% of the population growth between 2020 and 2024.

Like most other major urban counties, Harris County saw a net domestic loss of over 100,000 residents in that time. Without international migration to make up the difference, the county's population would have stagnated.

Texas State Demographer Lloyd Potter notes that some of

Growth continues on A3



A woman looks out on the Houston skyline in 2021. The city depends on immigration for a large portion of its growth.