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Good Reasons for a Reservoir

By Lou Ellen Ruesink, Editor, Texas Water Resources

Ask Comanche County residents about Lake Proctor and you will probably hear what a nice place it is for family reunions, or how many campers and permanent residents it attracts to the area, or how busy its boat ramps are.

Lake Proctor, however, was not built for recreational activities. It was constructed to control flooding on the Leon River and to supply municipal water to nearby towns.

The reservoir's supply purpose became dramatically clear to area recreationists in 1978 when low rainfall in the watershed caused the reservoir level to drop more than ten feet. Water supply withdrawal for towns and irrigators continued throughout the year while boat docks and fishing piers were left "high and dry" and lake cabins faced unsightly mudflats.

Spring rains this year filled Lake Proctor once again and brought the reservoir surface back up to the level recreationists enjoy. But since flood control is another major purpose for the reservoir, boat docks and fishing piers as well as park roads and camp sites may well be underwater after the next good rain.

The conflicts between recreational use and other uses of Lake Proctor are typical of lakes throughout the state. Reservoirs have been built in Texas primarily to control flood water and to meet the water demands of cities, industries, irrigators, and power producers. Legal priority for water in reservoirs, just as for all surface water in the state, begins with domestic and municipal use and progresses downward for industry, irrigation, mining, hydroelectric power, navigation, and finally to recreation--the lowest priority.

Less than one-third of Texas' reservoirs list recreation as a purpose, yet no one who has recently visited one of the states' 170 major reservoirs can doubt that reservoirs are indeed a valuable recreation resource. Water-based recreation has become more and more

in demand as the state grows in population and becomes more urbanized. Texans who spend their working hours in confined urban surroundings, according to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), seek outdoor settings for their leisure hours. They are also increasingly willing to spend the time and money for outdoor recreation --especially if it is water related.

A statewide plan for outdoor recreation prepared by the TPWD estimates that 71 percent of all rural outdoor recreation participation occurs on or in the immediate vicinity of water. The five most popular rural outdoor activities, as listed in the plan, are fishing, camping, swimming, picnicking, and boating.

Even though natural lakes are almost nonexistent in Texas, the state has more surface water within its boundaries than in any other state except Alaska. Manmade lakes built since 1940 not only supply state recreationists surface water acres, but also provide 18,000 miles of shoreline. This compares to only 624 miles of shoreline along the Texas Gulf Coast.

Chief Suppliers

Almost 70 percent of the much-sought-after surface water in Texas has been provided by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers or one of eight Texas river authorities. Other reservoirs in the state have been developed by cities, water districts, private power companies, irrigation companies, and other state and federal agencies. Two reservoirs on the Rio Grande are owned and administered by an international commission. None of these reservoir owners, however, has the primary responsibility of providing recreation.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers supplies more water-based recreation than any other entity in the state as it administers 219 parks with 34,823 acres of developed parkland in connection with over 520,000 surface acres of water. Although the Corps does not build reservoirs primarily for recreation, its projects nationwide serve more recreationists than any other public or private organization including the National Park Service.

The Corps completed its first reservoir project in Texas--Lake Texoma--in 1942. Since that time, the Corps has built or is presently constructing 25 major Texas reservoirs. Seven of the Corps reservoirs were built in cooperation with river authorities. The Brazos River Authority and the Corps have built five reservoirs together: Proctor, Belton, Somerville, Stillhouse Hollow, and Waco. The Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority and the Corps cooperated in constructing Canyon Lake, and the Upper Colorado River Authority joined the Corps in building O.C. Fisher Reservoir.

Seventeen additional reservoirs are owned by river authorities. These reservoirs, managed by eight different river authorities, offer recreationists a combined total of 444,125 acres of surface water and 2,867 acres of developed parkland.

Corps reservoirs differ from those managed by river authorities in that the federal agency owns all of the land along the water's edge. River authorities frequently own only the

right to flood land above the normal level of the lake. This means that the Corps can select public access and recreational use points whereas private land owners control to a large extent development around river authority reservoirs. The Corps also plans for future recreation demand and purchases land during the initial phases of a project's design.

Most river authorities, however, are limited in ways to finance recreational land acquisition and development because few have taxing authority and none use revenues from water sales for acquisition of recreation land. In most cases, land to be purchased above the flood easement must be paid for with income derived from the additional land, or from grants received from private, state, or federal sources. As a result, some river authorities have built reservoirs without purchasing any land for public access to the water.

Legislative Requirements

One of the requirements of Corps projects is that a certain amount of land be set aside and developed for the access and use of the general public. Existing law also authorizes the Corps to construct, operate, and maintain public parks and recreational facilities on government-owned lands at water resources development projects. This requirement means that even though the Corps did not build Lake Proctor for recreation, it is responsible for developing and managing recreation areas on land around the reservoir.

River authorities have had no such legislative mandate to serve recreationists. Until 1971, in fact, most river authorities were not authorized to supply recreation although they were directed not to prevent free public use of their lands. They generally served the public by making land available to other agencies for recreational development or by leasing their land for commercial recreational enterprises.

Since the passage of the River Authority Recreation Act of 1971, however, all river authorities in Texas have had the power, authority, right, privilege, and function to conserve and develop water resources in Texas for public recreation purposes and to acquire and improve parkland adjacent to or in the vicinity of public waters.

A few river authorities have accepted some responsibility for recreational development on their reservoirs, but most still depend to a great extent on other agencies for recreational supply. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department works closely with all river authorities in providing public access and recreational areas on reservoirs owned by river authorities; and federal agencies such as the National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service as well as local agencies also manage recreational areas in connection with river authority projects. In addition, private commercial developments on river authority-owned reservoirs offer important services to recreationists as do nonprofit organizations such as youth and church organizations.

Future demand for water-based recreation will likely force river authorities and other reservoir owners in the state to become even more involved in recreation supply. The

TPWD projects demand for outdoor-recreation by the year 2000 to reach approximately 2.75 billion activity days. This would be a 412 percent increase over actual participation in 1970. At least 30 percent of the demand will be for activities on or immediately adjacent to major reservoirs.

Present surface waters in Texas should be increased by approximately 103,000 surface acres to meet the projected demand according to the TPWD. Perhaps more importantly, however, the operating agencies must give recreational demand some priority according to its importance to state residents. An example of this would be providing better access to existing reservoirs and planning for recreational use on proposed reservoirs.

Reservoirs for water supply and flood control will probably not be built at the pace of the past three decades. New reservoir construction in Texas has already declined in the 1970's and will likely continue at a slower rate because (1) construction costs for new reservoirs have skyrocketed; (2) most appropriate reservoir sites are already developed; (3) environmental impact concerns slow nearly all projects; and (4) fewer federal dollars are available for water development. It is therefore imperative that recreation be considered as a purpose for future reservoir construction.

Because of reservoirs such as Lake Proctor, Texans will continue to:

- enjoy a dependable source of water for homes, lawns, and gardens.
- reap the benefits of irrigated agriculture and industrial growth.
- forget what spring floods were like on uncontrolled rivers.

An increasing number of Texans, however, will appreciate most the camping, boating, fishing, picnicking, star gazing, skiing, sailing, hiking, duck hunting, sun bathing, lake living, bird watching, canoeing, day dreaming, floating, and nature studying opportunities at Lake Proctor and other Texas reservoirs.