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What Is a River Authority?

By Lee Pilgrim, Editor, Texas Water Resources

Individual Texans when asked "What is a river authority?" would have as widely varying answers as the blindmen gave when queried about the elephant. And the majority would be hard put to give an answer at all.

The chief reason for many different answers is the human aspect. Each person tells what the river authority does for him. Another reason for disparity in definition is that each river authority has its own personality. Although all perform certain basic functions, individual authorities offer services uniquely needed by people in the specific basin.

Why it is that many Texans would not be able to define a river authority is a mystery, considering the wide scope of influence the river authority has on lives of the people in the basin. But it is true. Recently the mayor of a city in which a river authority headquarters is located admitted, "As closely as I work with them on occasion, sometimes I wonder. The man on the street may know where their office is and see them drive by but not know what they do. We possibly could use them more but don't think about them."

A possible explanation for this non-image may be that no individual (at least very few) receives a bill from the local river authority for a specific service, nor does he (except for one or two authorities) pay a tax to help support the authority's projects. Nevertheless, his life is touched in many ways by the river authority. Water supply and distribution, flood control, and water quality control are the three activities that river authorities are directed by the legislature to carry out. In addition, they are given authority to develop navigation, and in some cases to generate hydroelectric or fossil fuel power. They also are empowered to provide park and recreational facilities and general river basin improvements and to supply technical assistance to local governments in water resource development and flood control.

The river's source and length, the terrain through which it flows, the location of the mouth, the amount of rainfall in the basin, the geographic size of the authority and the period of its existence, plus population, industry, forests, soil, and agriculture of the region--all these factors contribute to the make-up of a river authority and determine its purposes and functions. Although similar, each authority is unique, and none an be labeled typical. Some authorities have a manager; others are managed through board committees. Only a few have taxing authority. All can issue revenue bonds, although some must have voter approval. All are served by a board of directors, but appointments of directors may differ. Some are named by the Governor; some are elected; some are appointed by member cities of the authority; and some are named by the Texas Water Rights Commission. All are subject to the supervision of the Water Rights Commission. All are created by an act of legislation.

The major river authorities listed in the order of their creation are as follows: Brazos River (1929), Lower Neches Valley (1933), Guadalupe-Blanco River (1935), Lower Colorado River (1935), Central Colorado River (1935), Upper Colorado River (1935), Nueces River (1935), Trinity River (1935), San Antonio River (1937), San Jacinto River (1937), Upper Guadalupe River (1939), Lavaca-Navidad River (1941), Sabine River (1949), Red River (1959), and Palo Duro River (1973).

Profile of a River Authority

The Guadalupe River starts up above Kerrville in rugged hill country often called the most beautiful part of Texas. It crosses the Balcones Escarpment where the land drops off and flows through the rolling blackland prairies on down to the flat coastal plain and out San Antonio Bay into the Gulf of Mexico. Meanwhile it has been joined by the San Marcos and Blanco rivers to become the Guadalupe-Blanco River Basin.

The Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority exists, through an act of Texas Legislature, to develop and protect that resource. According to GBRA General Manager John Specht every activity of the Authority "comes back to those two basic tenets."

Development and protection of the resource have involved GBRA in a broad spectrum of activities, directly or indirectly: soil conservation, hydroelectric power generation, recreation, flood protection, water supply, irrigation, water treatment, wastewater treatment, water quality studies, and water quality management.

Way Back When

Created in 1935, GBRA put 11 motor graders to work at different points up and down the basin building small watershed retaining structures and stock tanks, and improving channels. These conservation practices, Mayor Al Koebig of Seguin recalls, were provided to farmers at cost.

Currently the most significant service of GBRA to farmers is the operation of Calhoun County Canal Division. Approximately 10,000 acres of rice land are irrigated with water

diverted from the Guadalupe. A diversion dam and salt water barrier constructed 10 miles above the mouth of the river in 1965 saved the rice farmer from extinction in that area. Rice farming area had dropped from 20,000 to 2,000 acres because of salt water intrusion during periods of low river flow.

The Canal System, with 85 miles of delivery canals and 79 miles of pipeline, provides water for 3,500 acres of other crops, for Union Carbide Corporation and National starch Corporation and for the city of Part Lavaca and 650 rural customers.

However pale the image of river authorities in other areas, GBRA is synonymous with water in Calhoun County. Ed Ruddick, chief water tender of the canal, is a veritable Good Humor Man to all the farmers.

Shannon Ramsey, a rice farmer in the basin 27 years, says, "I call Eddie and ask for water at his earliest convenience--usually adding, 'this afternoon would be all right.'"

Aid to Farmers

Ramsey reported the waiting period for irrigation water had been cut down since GBRA bought the canal system and modernized it. He said rice farming would have died out completely without the installation of the salt water barrier.

The barrier employs two 50-foot long rubberized bags (about the thickness of a sidewall on a tire) which are inflated with water to control the height of the dam. During periods of low river flow, the bags automatically inflate to fur feet elevation and prevent salt water passing into the canal.

"We turn this thing on automatic, and these bags come up out of the deep like the Lock Ness monster," remarked Engineer Robert Henslee.

Water and waste water treatment facilities also are calling attention to GBRA. Port Lavaca Water Treatment plant, in operation since 1970, delivers 2,000,000 gallons of potable water a day. Victoria Regional Wastewater Disposal System, begun in 1972, is a 5,500,000 gallon-per-day reclamation system composed of two reclamation plants. The Authority constructed a new 3,000,000 gallon-a-day plant and also rehabilitated and now operates the original Victoria City Sewage Treatment Plant. GBRA also has three smaller treatment plants in operation, two of which are concentrating on removing phosphorus to control algae in lakes which are surrounded by private homes.

The Authority is concerned about the quality of water up and down the basin, not just what is used for drinking, but also what is returned through waste effluent. Samples from cities and communities throughout the basin are analyzed at the GBRA regional lab in Seguin.

Other Operations

The Authority also operates six small hydroelectric plants with an installed capacity of 16,080 kilowatts. Energy generated by the system is sold to Central Power & Light Company. In addition there is the recreation division operating facilities in Gonzales and Guadalupe Counties and planning a major facility--Coleto Creek Project--a joint undertaking with Central Power & Light Company. Site of the Power plant reservoir, which will be about 3,000 surface acres with a 17,000-foot long dam, is between Goliad and Victoria. Navigation is one river authority function in which GBRA has no direct involvement. The Victoria Barge Canal comes alongside the river to Victoria, but it is independent of GBRA.

The project which Manager Specht discusses with greatest gusto is the Canyon Reservoir, a conservation storage reservoir that means water in the future. Present storage is 50,000 acre feet which has been contracted to a power company, a major city, smaller municipalities, rural water system, and a few individuals. Actual storage is 386,000 acre feet, which Specht says assures 50,000 acre feet of yield annually based on computer studies of record droughts.

"Our prime purpose is to see that the people of this area, particularly the basin, have the water supply they need whenever they need it," Specht pointed out. "We now have this reservoir with 50,000 acre feet assured, not involving the natural run of the river. When will we need the next? How much more will we need in 5, 10, 20 years? Who will pay for it? Use it? What to change?

Basin-Wide Water Rate

To answer these question, GBRA made a study and established a basin-wide rate for stored water. According to Specht, it is based on "what we have to pay to amortize Canyon, what our operation and maintenance costs are in the water supply system, and what future reservoirs we must develop--and when, and how much we have to charge now to have the financial capability of paying for reservoirs as needed." He pointed out that the Authority is not a taxing entity and projects must pay for themselves. A basin-wide rate was designed to give that financial capability

"In each contract we can lower or raise the basin-wide rate in order to fit the exact circumstances because we can only estimate now what the next reservoir would cost. If more, the rate would go up; if less, down. Ultimately, when the resource is fully developed, we would lower rates to cover only operating and maintenance costs," he explained.

People in the basin who remember the 1955 drought may find in the water storage program the feature that gives the Authority greatest visibility. Guadalupe County ranch manager Buddy Siltmann has already contracted for 100 acre feet from Canyon Reservoir. He's been doing it since 1968 in order "to be sure I have it when I need it." Such security costs him $800 a year even if he doesn't use it. That amount of water will "put three inches on a 100 acres four times."

Siltmann also has turned to GBRA for advice on using waste water for fertilizer and other water-related problems.

"When I go talk to them, they listen to me. I think most people who misunderstand river authorities think that tax money pays or their services, but I understand they have to pay their own way."

Who Is an RA Director?

. . . doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief, tinker, tailor . . .

Any of those may show up as the profession of a member of the board of directors of a Texas river authority. Sitting around the board table of the Brazos River Authority, for example, are bankers, newspapermen, automobile dealers, farmer-ranchers, veterinarian, lawyer, and businessmen involved in transportation, oil, building and contracting, insurance, and broadcasting.

All have in common an avid interest in water resource development. It was their action in that area that made them potential candidates for appointments to river authority boards by the Texas Governor.

The typical river authority board member is a prominent citizen who is active in civic and community affairs. Frank Thurmond, Jr., of Bryan, is an example. Active in the Bryan Chamber of Commerce, he has served as president of the Lions Club and of the Industrial Foundation. The latter is the community wing of the Chamber of Commerce which promotes industry in the area.

Directors receive no pay, yet must be able to attend board meetings as well as committee meetings. Thurmond serves on two committees which may have from two to 10 meetings a year. He explained that most of the Authority's work is accomplished through committee recommendations to the board of directors. The directors also are charged with selecting the Authority manager.

Conflicts over to-build or not-to-build dams in the area would seem to affect the business affairs of a board member, but Thurmond says, "I don't think I've lost friends over a dam issue. I probably have more friends than enemies as a result of my position."

Thurmond cites as BRA's greatest responsibility providing water which will be needed in the future for people of the Brazos River basin. That means actively seeking new projects to impound surface water. He emphasized the need to start far enough in advance that the water will be available when it is needed.

He quoted a former BRA director, whose remark has become a slogan with the Authority, "If I'm going to be criticized, I'd rather be criticized for providing too much water than for not providing enough."

Thurmond is in the first year of his second term and plans to continue to serve as long as he is needed. "It's something I enjoy. As long as I'm doing a service, I will probably continue to serve."