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Texas must prioritize improving groundwater management | Opinion

Vanessa Puig-Williams, Guest columnist

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Water had its day during the Texas 89th legislative session, as lawmakers recognized that water is at least as important as roads.

Spearheaded by Sen. Charles Perry, the Legislature approved a constitutional measure to dedicate \$1 billion annually over the next 20 years from excess sales tax revenue to support critical water needs, such as developing new water supplies and wastewater reuse projects, repairing aging infrastructure, and conserving agricultural water.

As the state becomes increasingly dry and our population continues to grow, this kind of monumental action was imperative for ensuring Texas has reliable water supplies in the future, and the fruits of these efforts will soon head for the ballot for voter approval. Our work, however, is far from over; groundwater management must now emerge as one of Texas' top priorities.

Amid the more prominent water funding achievements this session, the Legislature also made an unprecedented and critical investment in groundwater — the state's largest, yet least understood, water source. Championed by Rep. Cody Harris and Sen. Lois Kolkhorst and supported by a broad coalition of stakeholders, the Legislature approved \$7.5 million in funding for grants to local groundwater conservation districts for research and data projects critical to long-term conservation and management of groundwater resources. This funding is an important step to equip groundwater conservation districts with the tools they need

to effectively manage groundwater — the only source of water for many rural communities in Texas and a vital source for springs and rivers across the state.

As groundwater levels decline, this session more so than others, lawmakers took a keen interest in groundwater. Indeed, a key reason behind Perry's efforts to secure dedicated funding for new water supply projects has been to offset pressure on fresh groundwater to meet shortfalls in water supply. Importantly, the newly adopted water infrastructure package includes a provision restricting public funds from being used to export fresh groundwater from rural areas — a safeguard for local communities and their aquifers.

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The Legislature also approved other positive measures that support the ability of groundwater conservation districts to effectively manage groundwater. [House Bill 2078](#), by Rep. Stan Gerdes, requires groundwater conservation districts to demonstrate that they are achieving their long-term management goals, known as desired future conditions — a process stakeholders have long advocated needs meaningful reform. Gerdes also authored [HB1633](#), legislation that requires groundwater conservation districts to consider impacts to smaller, domestic wells when issuing permits — a solution to declines in landowners' drinking water wells brought into focus as a result of the city of San Antonio's Vista Ridge export project that pipes groundwater from rural counties northeast of Austin to San Antonio.

The issue of groundwater leaving rural parts of Texas to satisfy the water demands from suburban sprawl is becoming increasingly contentious. As the session concluded, Harris and Rep. Trent Ashby issued stern statements in opposition to proposals to pump billions of gallons of water per year from rural Anderson and Houston counties in East Texas, potentially devastating the water supply for the city of Crockett and harming the property rights of surrounding landowners.

The increase in threats to rural groundwater supplies — whether for groundwater export or for large-scale industrial use, like data centers — necessitate that the state take a closer look at groundwater conservation districts' authorities; whether they

need clearer permissions to deny large-scale production permits; and whether parts of the state that lack groundwater regulation should come under groundwater management in the future.

The end of the 89th legislative session marks the beginning of a new and consequential era for water in Texas — with billions of dollars potentially available to shore up the state's water supplies and funding for local groundwater data in place for the first time. But if we fail to focus on improving the way groundwater is managed, Texas will fall short of true water resilience. Continued investments in science and a robust regulatory framework that promotes responsible use and long-term sustainability is essential. For the love of Texas, we must invest in groundwater.

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