



**William
McKenzie**

●
Dallas
Morning News

William McKenzie: Obama Should Look Forward on Water

**Dallas Morning News
May 28, 2010**

The Washington press corps put Barack Obama on the defensive last week, forcing him to look backward at his handling of the BP oil spill. I confess to some agitation when we journalists spend so much time pressing politicians to look behind them. Some of that obviously is necessary, but we need to spend as much time getting them to look ahead at big problems bearing down upon us.

The Economist cast a look forward last week, alerting its readers to the water challenges faced in just about every corner of the globe. My favorite line: "If water has the capacity to enhance life, its absence has the capacity to make it miserable."

Take a deep breath; the U.S. is not running out of water. But many states increasingly confront tough choices about how to find it, allocate it and conserve it. And, if they don't get ahead of that, there will come a day when thirsty people will ask why their leaders didn't plan better.

Which is why Obama should look ahead and set in motion a planning process, not a top-down federal operation, as some in Congress envision. There's no way Washington can know all the ins-and-outs of each state's water needs.

The administration and Congress should require every state to craft a 50-year water plan. And municipal leaders, business executives, environmentalists, hydrologists, citizen activists and others with a direct interest in their state's water supplies should be part of this.

Texas has had such an operation for the last decade. In 1997, legislators divided the state into 16 regions, required local folks in each to create water planning councils and mandated that various "stakeholders" participate.

That last part has been crucial. There is a tendency in water policy discussions for people to talk about the "water community" and the "environmental community." They too often see each other as opponents.

Texas' planning process forces people from different backgrounds to hash out their agendas. Not everyone likes the final product. In fact, things get messy. There's a growing brouhaha now about how much water from Texas' rivers should go to cities and farmers and how much should flow into the Gulf of Mexico.

What's more, a plan won't matter if a state doesn't act on it, which is a risk here if legislators continue to fail to create a way to finance Texas' 50-year plan. If lawmakers keep stalling, the costs only grow. So will the chances that some parts of Texas won't be ready for the next big drought.

But at least Texas has a way to identify future supplies, which you can't say about every other state. And in Texas all sides are given a chance to make their case, whether that's about the best approach to conservation, aquifers, rivers or lakes.

This strikes me as an approach Obama should like. He's big on people of different stripes trying to iron out common solutions. This template forces that kind of discussion, requiring interest groups that prefer pursuing their own goals to think about mutual answers.

The president may be tempted to federalize this issue, which has been his way on other issues (see taking over GM and creating national school standards), and some on the left would prefer the feds do all the planning. Here in Texas, there is even a lawsuit aimed at getting the feds to allocate water rights in Central Texas.

I can see why Washington may need to mediate water disputes between states, but telling folks in every state how much water they should use? Talk about big brother.

Obama should resist that and start pushing states to think ahead. No use waiting around to look backward at this problem, too.

William McKenzie is an editorial columnist for The Dallas Morning News. Readers may write to him at the Dallas Morning News, Communications Center, Dallas, Texas 75265; e-mail: wmckenzie@dallasnews.com

(c) 2010, The Dallas Morning News.

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.