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# Water shortage on agenda in Austin

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Texas Agriculture Commissioner Susan Combs led the discussion on one of the hottest topics facing the state legislature this session — water.

Combs and other water authorities spoke at the Texas Public Policy Foundation's 78th Legislature Policy Orientation.

Combs said officials will have to try to reach a balance between providing

water to growing populations while respecting private property rights while at the same time assuring long-term water supplies for communities.

Although Kendall County and Boerne are facing a water shortage, a large part of the United States is facing the same problem.

"The entire western portion of the United States is going to be extremely water short. We do not have at this point a good water conservation policy in place," Combs said.

California was recently cut off from water due to a dispute over the Colorado River, Combs said.

But Combs believes there are many options which would bring water to Texas:

Water could be obtained through desalinization, mountain creek water, lake water and leasing water, Combs said.

"We can do a lot of things to capture

See WATER, Page 8A

## **WATER FROM PAGE 1A**

water," Combs said.

De-salinization, removing the salt from marine water, may provide water for areas near the sea that are dry and need water for human consumption, said Rep. Bill Callegari of Harris County.

Groundwater Conservation Districts are useful tools communities can use to control their own destiny, Combs said.

However nine groundwater conservation districts have been deemed inactive because they do not have funds to do what they want to do, according to Combs.

In 1992 Combs would have never thought she would support groundwater conservation districts, but today she feels they can greatly benefit a community; however, groundwater conservation districts must be careful to treat every person fairly, she said.

In 2000, 52 groundwater conservation districts were formed in Texas, and in 2001, 35 more

were added. All but a few of the districts were approved by voters, according to Callegari.

In conjunction with Senate Bills 1 and 2, groundwater conservation districts' authority will be surveyed in the coming legislative session, said Rep. Robert Puente. Puente represents a portion of Bexar County.

"I think the issues for this next coming legislative session are going to be environmental flows, water conservation, groundwater district powers and financing new water projects," Puente said.

The state's over-reaching goal is always to meet the supply and demand—the need for the water and land, Puente said.

"Over the past five legislative sessions, I think you've seen a tremendous change in Texas water law. We started for the first time in regulating non-well registration in the Edward's Aquifer Authority. Before that it was essentially you own the land, you own the water under there. You could pull out as much water as you want," Puente said.

Water conservation will also

be looked at, Puente said.

Puente sees no reason why residents of El Paso and San Antonio use 150 gallons per day per capita when cities such as Dallas or Fort Worth use more than 200 gallons per day per capita.

"It simply a matter of education and understanding where conservation is. San Antonio, for example, has year-round water restriction measures," Puente said.

Government may not have finished writing water laws, Combs said.

"All economic activity follows water," Combs said. "If you don't have any water, you dry up. You dry up your economic activity. You dry up the future for you jobs. You dry up the future for your children."

Combs hopes people will come together and help solve water issues.

Water issues 10 or 15 years down the road need to be looked at, Puente said.

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