

WATER BOONDOGGLES

The biggest little water plan in Texas

by Todd H. Votteler, Ph.D.

Politicians and engineers have long come up with grandiose plans for moving water from one place to another. One plan proposed towing icebergs from Antarctica to Saudi Arabia. And Alaska Governor Wally Hickel dreamed up a \$150 billion, 1,700-mile undersea pipeline to pipe water from Alaska to California. This month, when 16 regional water planning groups submit their 50-year plans to the Texas Water Development Board for review, seems like a fitting time to look back at Texas' biggest water boondoggle to date – the 1968 Water Plan.

The 1968 plan involved developing an astounding supply of water – enough to submerge Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Rhode Island and the District of Columbia to a depth of one foot (with some left over). The key features of the plan included a canal that would have tapped the Mississippi River below New Orleans, bringing 12 to 13 million acre-feet (one acre-foot is 325,851 gallons of water) hundreds of miles to Texas. The soil and debris excavated to create the canal in Louisiana would have been used to create a massive levee to act as a barrier against inland flooding from hurricanes. The canal, they

reasoned, could also be used for barge shipping between New Orleans and the Beaumont/Port Arthur/Orange area. The Sabine River, inconveniently out of place, would be made to run backward to connect to the canal from Louisiana.

Once in Texas, the Mississippi River would enter two cement-lined aqueducts called the Coastal Canal and the Trans-Texas Canal. These canals were to snake 1,200 miles across the northern and

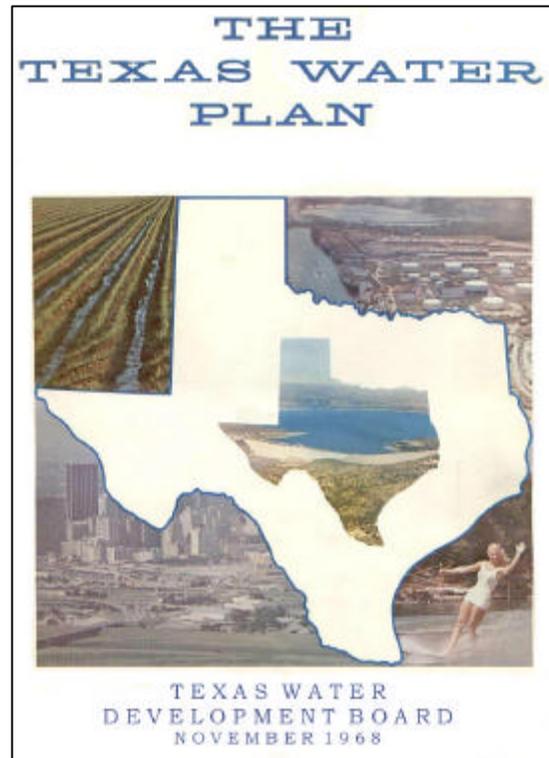
southern portions of Texas. The Coastal Canal would extend to the Rio Grande valley. On the way, it would have had to “duck” underneath four major rivers and 142 minor streams along the Texas Gulf Coast.

The second canal, the Trans-Texas, would have transported the Mississippi River water to northeast Texas, then uphill to Lubbock, with one spur veering off to New Mexico and another to the Trans-Pecos and the El

Paso. The water would be pumped uphill more than 4,000 feet from the Mississippi River to Lubbock to meet the irrigation needs of the Texas High Plains. (At that time, the Ogallala Aquifer was expected to be depleted by 2020. Thanks to conservation measures, it is now expected to provide water further into the future.)

To pump the water to its final destination, the project would have required 7 million kilo-watts of electricity – more than a third of the generating capacity in Texas at the time. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which had its own even larger version of the Texas Water Plan, calculated that 12 million kilowatts would be needed – and that 12 nuclear power plants would be necessary to provide the additional power because nuclear power would soon be “dirt cheap.”

In addition to the canals, 62 new reservoirs, mostly in East Texas, would have been constructed to capture another 4 million acre-feet of water for eventual shipment to Lubbock and the Rio Grande Valley. The new reservoirs would have covered 4,500 square miles of land. The Sulphur River in East Texas would have been dammed from the Louisiana border almost to Dallas. The plan



also included the elimination of some 60 million acres of brush-guzzling brush, including saltcedar and juniper.

In 1968 the cost to Texas for the plan was projected by the TWDB to be \$3.5 billion, with an additional \$5.5 billion to come from the federal government. Some estimated that the project would ultimately have cost close to \$14 billion in 1968 dollars.

For the plan to proceed, an amendment to the Texas Constitution was needed for the state to finance its share of the project. In the end, the plan was defeated at the ballot box – by only 6,000 votes. Thus it became the plan that never was, and thankfully so.

Today the 1968 Texas Water Plan stands as a monument to another time, when bigger was always better. Mark Twain’s words seem to apply to such endeavors when he said, “Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to.”

