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State board recommends permit for Lake Ralph Hall

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A state board issued a recommendation Tuesday supporting the Upper Trinity Regional Water District's plan to build Lake Ralph Hall.

The State Office of Administrative Hearings found that the water district's application met all the requirements to divert water from the Sulphur River Basin to the Trinity River Basin.

The final decision on the district's 2003 water use permit application will be up to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. The agency could act later this year.

Lake Ralph Hall, named for the longtime congressman, would be the first major water supply reservoir authorized for North Texas in 30 years.

It would be built on a 12,000-acre site in southeastern Fannin County. About 45,000 acre-feet of water per year would be diverted for use in Collin, Cooke, Dallas, Denton, Grayson and Wise counties.

SOAH's decision, which comes on the heels of a new law creating a state fund to finance new water projects, was welcomed by Upper Trinity Executive Director Tom Taylor.

"This lake is the first one in a line of several lakes proposed for Texas over the next 50 years," Taylor said. "The Legislature is setting up some financial options and opportunities. It's all good news."

Not everyone was pleased by the recommendation.

Environmentalists have argued that the lake would destroy agricultural land and wildlife habitat. They say other measures should be taken to conserve water and use it more efficiently.

"I'm disappointed in the ruling," said Janice Bezanson, executive director of the Texas Conservation Alliance. "The evidence clearly shows that Lake Ralph Hall would be one of the most expensive water supply options for this region."

Myron Hess, manager of Texas water programs for the National Wildlife Federation, said the water district should have a stronger conservation plan.

"It's a weak water conservation plan when compared to what should be required for a district asking to be granted the right to move water from one area to another," Hess said.

He said SOAH did make some recommendations to restore water in a 3-mile stretch below the proposed Lake Ralph Hall dam.

"But we're concerned there will be greater impacts to a larger stretch downstream," he said.

Flower Mound, which has a seat on the Upper Trinity board, has also opposed the project. The town contends that the reservoir will raise costs for customers and more economical water sources are available.

The SOAH board found that Upper Trinity's water conservation plan complies with state standards and that there are no other feasible alternative water sources.

Flower Mound Mayor Tom Hayden said the board's recommendation doesn't change the town's position.

"We just hope they won't build the lake until they can demonstrate there's a demand for it," Hayden said.

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