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As Texas Bakes in a Long Drought, Water Becomes a Focus for Legislators

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AUSTIN, Tex. — There is usually no shortage of controversial and politically divisive issues for lawmakers to address in the opening days of a state legislative session, from abortion to [immigration](#) to gun rights.

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But throughout the opening of the 83rd Texas Legislature last week, one of the most frequently discussed topics had bipartisan support: improving the state's water infrastructure as the population booms and a devastating two-year

drought drags on.

Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst and other Republicans proposed tapping an emergency fund that is fed by taxes on oil production to finance the building of new reservoirs and other projects identified in the state's 50-year water plan, an unusual move in a state where fiscal conservatives usually push to streamline government and limit spending.

Gov. Rick Perry, a Republican, and the House speaker, [Joe Straus III](#), a Republican from San Antonio, both mentioned the state's water needs in their opening-day speeches to legislators on Tuesday, despite the rainfall that soaked Austin as they spoke.

In 2011, the last time the Legislature convened for one of its biennial sessions, Representative Allan Ritter, a Republican and the chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, was unsuccessful in getting lawmakers to approve legislation imposing an annual fee on water users like homeowners and businesses to help finance projects in the state water plan.

But on Thursday, Mr. Ritter proposed bills that would draw \$2 billion from the state's emergency Rainy Day Fund to establish a water infrastructure bank that would lend money for the projects. This time, his proposals received support from Republican leaders and groups that are often on the opposite sides of issues, including the [Sierra Club's Texas chapter](#), the [Texas Association of Business](#) and other industry groups. At least 20 percent of the money available in the fund would be used for conservation and reuse efforts.

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“There were people who were trying to talk about water last time, and there wasn’t any money, and there wasn’t the critical mass,” said James Henson, the director of the [Texas Politics Project](#) at the University of Texas, Austin. “Elite opinion begins to coalesce after a little while, and it takes people a while to get the issue out there, and I think that’s part of what’s happened with water.”

Another reason for the shift, and why some are calling this Legislature the “water session,” has to do with the sense of urgency over the drought.

Texas is in the grip of a record-breaking drought that began in the fall of 2010 and continues to affect many parts of the state. So far, it is the third-worst drought in Texas since at least 1895, when statewide weather records begin, with the multiyear drought in the 1950s being the worst, said John Nielsen-Gammon, the state climatologist.

The drought has cost farmers billions of dollars and has forced hundreds of communities to limit water usage. Eighteen public water systems were projected to run out of water in 180 days or fewer as of Tuesday, according to the [Texas Commission on Environmental Quality](#), which monitors and assists those systems.

Meanwhile, the levels of many lakes and reservoirs, a crucial part of the water supply, have steadily decreased with the lack of rainfall.

Without additional water supplies, Texas will be short 8.3 million acre-feet of water by 2060, according to the [Texas Water Development Board](#). It is a nearly unimaginable amount: one million gallons of water equals just 3.07 acre-feet. The board also estimates that failure to meet water needs in times of drought in 2060 could cost Texas businesses and workers up to \$116 billion.

But advocates for other causes worry that water may overshadow the state’s other needs and divert attention from restoring the money to social services, parks, education and other programs that was cut during the last legislative session. Thousands of state employees were laid off. School districts have reported eliminating thousands of jobs, increasing class sizes and reducing library services and other programs.

In 2011, when education advocates and Democratic lawmakers called on Mr. Perry and other Republicans to tap the Rainy Day Fund to offset some of the cuts to education, the governor and others refused, saying that doing so would leave the state ill prepared for emergencies.

But last week, some of those same leaders, including Republicans who opposed tapping the fund two years ago for recurring expenses, said they would support using the fund to pay for water projects, through Mr. Ritter’s bills or other proposals.

“I think it’s all ideological,” said Bob Sanborn, the president of [Children at Risk](#), a nonprofit research and advocacy group in Houston.

“In the end, people don’t really have strong principles about a rainy-day fund,” he said. “They want to fund the things that they want to fund. And if something is seemingly not part of your ideology, and public education doesn’t seem to be of high concern to a lot of our Texas leaders, it falls by the wayside.”

Mr. Ritter said there were several priorities for lawmakers to focus on, but that water was a building block of society.

“I’m not saying this is a higher priority than education,” Mr. Ritter said. “We’ve got to have a great education system, but we’ve got to have water to nourish our people and our

economy. What comes first, the chicken or the egg? Do we have educated people, and then water comes? Or do we have water and have a reason for people to be here to go to school?”

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