

NEWS & POLITICS

# Texas's Plan to Solve the Water Crisis Could Change the Coastal Bend Forever

There's money to be made bringing fresh water and big industry to South Texas—but locals fear what they could be losing in the trade.

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October 30, 2025



Sally Black navigates her boat through Baffin Bay.  
Reid Bader

If there's a more ideal place than Baffin Bay to spend the day fishing, Sally Black can't name it. The 65-year-old veteran fishing guide feels she's found the "last best place," just 45 miles south of Corpus Christi. It's hard to argue as we glide across the bay on her 23-foot-long power catamaran in late August. For long stretches of our four-hour tour, Black's was the only boat on the glassy water—making it easy to spot the ripples pushed by broad-shouldered redfish in the shallow water and the little oil slicks left by schools of baitfish attacked by hungry sea trout. Silvery mullet, the trout's favorite prey, jumped above the surface here and there, but only an occasional "drummer"—a commercial fisherman bringing in a haul of prized black drum—appeared as a tiny silhouette on the horizon.

"It's that time of year," Black said. Kids were back at school, and many sportsmen were preparing to shift from fishing to the hunting of doves, then ducks and deer. Bird-watchers hire Black to tour Baffin Bay during fall migration, but for the most part, it would be very quiet until spring.

A lifetime sport fisher, Black moved to the Texas coast from Houston in 1985 and has since mastered multiple ways to fish its waters. She was a fly-fishing guide and pioneered kayak fishing in Rockport, but when Aransas Bay grew "too crowded" for her taste, around 2008, she found her way south to Baffin, where she learned to trout fish. "Now I'm the guru." Black knows just about everything about the bay complex, the map of which looks like a fallen tree with gnarled branches twisting inland in all directions. Like any good guide, she knows the spots where schools of each species congregate in various conditions, as well as the quirks of the tertiary bays—Laguna Salada, Alazan Bay, and Cayo del Grullo.

Black thought she knew everything about her favorite place, but she only recently learned about a possible threat to its future. Texas's state government is hoping to develop several desalination facilities in the Coastal Bend, mainly to provide fresh water to thirsty petrochemical plants and heavy industry that are already operating there and others that are planned for construction. And the waste, in the form of heavily concentrated brine, from some of those facilities could end up in local estuaries including Baffin

Bay, where biologists say it could kill aquatic plants, fish, and shellfish and derail migratory bird routes that depend on the ecosystems of the Texas Coast.

In a statewide election on November 4, Texans will vote on Proposition 4, which would funnel \$1 billion of the state's annual sales tax revenue—after collections top \$46.5 billion—into the Texas Water Fund, starting in 2027. “Water supply in Texas has to be the priority,” said state Senator Charles Perry, a Lubbock Republican, who championed the bill that created the Texas Water Fund. Given the state's rapid growth, and the past two decades of on-and-off drought, “we're twenty years behind,” in securing sources of water for agriculture, industry, and residential use. If Prop 4 passes, Perry predicts that desalination—cleaning the salt and other chemicals out of seawater, brackish groundwater, and even the watery fluids used in fracking—will provide about three quarters of the new fresh water the state needs.

In July, Baffin Bay residents learned that a brackish groundwater desalination plant, operated by Seven Seas Water Group, which is owned by a Swedish private equity group called EQT, had broken ground in nearby Driscoll. No decisions had been made for how the plant would deal with its brine waste, but one option raised alarms: dumping the brine into Petronila Creek, which flows directly into Baffin Bay. That waste—highly concentrated brine, about twice as salty as the source water—contains all the removed salts, minerals, contaminants, and possibly, depending on the treatment method, residual chemicals like chlorine or antiscalants that prevent the buildup of mineral deposits inside pipes. For every gallon of drinking water that a desal plant produces, it creates a gallon or more of brine. The Seven Seas plant announced an initial daily production of three million gallons of drinking water, with the capacity to expand to up to 30 million gallons. Estuary researchers say that if the wastewater is discharged into bays or creeks, all that dense, salty water could sink and accumulate, ultimately killing fish, seagrass, and bottom-feeders, such as crabs and oysters.

Black told me that Baffin's shallow water, mild temperature, relative stillness, and soft bottom have produced a singular fishing environment. It's

unusual for redfish to spend their entire lives in one bay, like they do in Baffin, and this low-stress life without migration has yielded what amounts to a big bathtub full of redfish, some of which are sixty years old and fifty inches long. Generations of trout follow the same pattern, Black said, and her clients have a reasonable chance at taking home a trophy fish from Baffin Bay. One reason Baffin Bay is so full of life, biologists say, is that the waters are brackish, a blend of freshwater and saltwater that is less saline than the open Gulf. Many species of fish and shellfish prefer brackish water, either year round or when they spawn. They can't thrive in seawater, much less in brine that is twice as salty. In dry years without regular infusions of fresh water, Baffin already flirts with the upper limit of salinity that its fish and shellfish can stand.



**Sally Black at Baffin Bay.**  
**Reid Bader**

The bay's location between two huge properties—the King Ranch to the north and the Kenedy Ranch to the south—contributes to its tranquility. A smattering of park pavilions and private homes were the lone signs of people as we pulled away from the bay's only boat ramp. Loyola Beach, an unincorporated area in Kleberg County, is the closest thing to a town touching the bay, and residents there drive ten miles inland to Rivera to get

their mail, Black said. It's part of the charm of Baffin Bay—a welcome consequence of its unspoiled remoteness, which has become an increasing rarity on the Gulf Coast.

From New Orleans to Freeport, the coast is studded with refineries, chemical plants, and other heavy industrial facilities. These plants provide well-paying jobs, and some state and local leaders would like to see more of them, especially around Corpus Christi. The main thing blocking them is the lack of fresh water.

But that's a future some Coastal Bend residents say they do not want. They live and work in rural areas by choice. "There's a lot of freedom on the water," Black said. "That's why people choose that lifestyle." She doesn't worry about whether she'll ever have the savings to retire—what's there for a fishing guide to retire from? But if the bay's ecosystem no longer supports the impressive catches she advertises on her website, she might be forced off the bay altogether.

Even without new industrial waste, residents and scientists have long worried about the health of Baffin Bay. In 2022, the Harte Research Institute at Texas A&M–Corpus Christi launched Bringing Baffin Back, a research and restoration initiative aimed at shoring up the fragile ecosystem. There's already plenty of waste from aging septic systems, illegal dumping, and agricultural runoff flowing into the creeks that feed on the bay, said Glynn Merritt, board president of the Baffin Bay Water Supply Corporation and owner of the Ranch House on Baffin Bay, a vacation rental house that primarily hosts fishers and hunters. As algae feed on the chemicals in runoff, the resulting blooms block out sunlight, killing the seagrasses that support marine life. The ensuing loss of oxygen leads to fish kills, with hundreds of dead fish washing up on shore. Add to these problems the brine from desalination, and you get a "multiple stressor effect," according to the Harte Research Institute.

"We're not against finding [fresh] water wherever we can," Merritt said, acknowledging the looming crisis, but he also wanted assurances that Baffin's ecosystem wouldn't be harmed. Residents wanted South Texas Water

Authority to amend the Seven Seas contract, requiring that the plant either inject the brine back into the ground—a more costly process called deep-well injection—or pipe the waste past the Laguna Madre, the 130 mile lagoon that runs along the Texas coast, into the open, circulating gulf, where it could dilute.

Any additional infrastructure—a well or a pipeline—adds to the up-front cost of desalination projects. And continually reinjecting or transporting brine requires additional energy, which accounts for about half of a plant’s overall operating costs. The finance experts I spoke with said the costs to build and operate these new water projects are notoriously difficult to project. And the more expensive water is to produce, the more expensive it is for consumers—unless investors eat those additional costs themselves.

A representative for Seven Seas said that, for the Driscoll plant, municipal governments, community members, and regulatory agencies were engaged at the “appropriate times” and that transparent community collaboration is the company’s goal. “We believe that brackish groundwater desalination, when developed responsibly and collaboratively, can be one of Texas’ most powerful tools for long-term water resilience,” said the project developer.

For some area residents like Andrew Mendez, a 36-year-old consultant in Kingsville, the process didn’t seem transparent at all, sparking suspicion. “When it happens in your backyard you can’t ignore it,” Mendez said. “Overnight a lot of people had to become environmental activists.” In August, Mendez and other residents learned that the contract between South Texas Water Authority and Seven Seas was signed before discharge impact studies were complete—meaning that the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, which issues permits for disposal methods based on ecological impacts, had not yet weighed in on the specifics of how the plant would deal with its brine. Nor was it clear how much the plant would discharge. Initially, the South Texas Water Authority—which is responsible for procuring water to sell to the small towns and county water systems in the area—planned to buy three million gallons a day from Seven Seas. But the company shared in a press release that it could potentially expand

production to as much as 30 million gallons per day. News began to surface that other entities were looking to purchase from Seven Seas, including Corpus Christi Water and Tesla, whose reported eight-million-gallon per day water needs at its Robstown lithium refinery, 27 miles west of downtown Corpus Christi, had been worrying residents since March.

Suddenly, the situation was sounding familiar: North of Baffin, community organizers were fighting to keep seawater desalination plants out of Corpus Christi Bay. The \$1.2 billion Inner Harbor plant, community activists said, was a gift to industry that would be expensive for residential users and lethal for fish and shellfish. Mendez reached out to Rachel Caballero—a local watchdog working to kill the Inner Harbor plant. She told him that city, county, and state authorities have essentially ceded the region to ammonia plants, carbon capture hubs, and other heavy industry—most of which need lots of water to operate. “Kiss the Coastal Bend goodbye,” she told Mendez. “It’s been promised to industry.”

Community activists got what they wanted in Corpus Christi—the city council killed the project in September. But the city is no closer to finding a solution to its quickly diminishing water supply. Industry representatives told the council the decision would hurt their operations. And the state funds dedicated to the desalination project cannot be reallocated to other city projects. “The state has invested tremendous resources into this project—\$235 million in direct funding, an offer of a \$757 million below-market-rate loan, and countless man-hours of assisting the city with navigating the permitting process and environmental reviews,” a representative from the governor’s office wrote to *Texas Monthly*, in an email detailing their eleventh-hour plea to Corpus Christi city council members to salvage the project. Backing out, they said, put Corpus Christi “in a very bad situation when it comes to future projects, as they have proven to be an untrustworthy partner.”

Statewide, access to water is now often the dealmaker or breaker for cities, counties, and regional development boards looking to court factories, refineries, and the huge data centers that power AI and cryptocurrency

production. The region must be able to supply the water for the big, thirsty factories, and there's only a handful of places to get millions of gallons of fresh water per day in a state running dry. Desalination sounds like a dream solution—converting unusable water to drinking water with no harm done. And that might be possible, Mendez allowed, if the plants commit to disposing of brine in a way that doesn't threaten the ecosystem.

Mendez frames his citizen investigation as a battle between private greed and public good, filing public information requests and mapping the potential conflicts of interest across the municipal governments and appointed boards involved with the project. He posted his findings online under the Facebook page “Brine and Blood in Baffin Bay.” (He has since changed the name to “South Texas Water Watch.”)

Black and other fishing guides were among the unlikely environmental activists rustled up by Mendez's efforts. “People were concerned already, but then a real shitstorm started to build around it,” Black told me. “It was the voice of the people that changed the tide.”

The night before our outing, on August 19, the South Texas Water Authority voted to remove the option of dumping brine into the Baffin watershed, handing a victory to Mendez, Black, and their neighbors. But it's a short-term victory, Mendez said. As Texas moves forward with its big plans for desalination—which will inevitably be key to the state's water future—without statewide rules on how the waste is managed, the situation in Baffin Bay may soon resemble a game of Whac-A-Mole. Just because one jurisdiction in the bay's watershed says no to dumping doesn't mean the next one will. Those who oppose it will have to be vigilant about monitoring contracts proposed in rural counties, small town councils, and obscure water boards to ensure that the cheapest option—dumping brine into creeks that feed the local bays—isn't on the table.

Black has little faith in government oversight. In Austin, she said too many of the overseers, and even the advocates who supposedly work on behalf of environmental interests, are beholden to those with the deepest pockets. The only people she trusts to preserve Baffin's future are the ones who love

the bay and the birds, fish, and wildlife it supports. “It’s up to all of the stewards of the bay systems to stay vigilant,” she said, adding with a smirk, “Don’t make me get the birdwatchers involved.”