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NEWS

# Texas is running out of water. Here's what you need to know

By **Megan Kimble**, Staff Writer

Nov 25, 2025



A floating dock sits in the water below a home just north of the dam at Medina Lake on Thursday, July 25, 2024. The lake is currently 3.5% full with a mean water level of 975.75 feet above sea level according to Water Data for Texas. Water levels have risen 5.47 feet in the last two days due to recent rains though the lake is still 88.46 feet below conservation pool level.

Texas is running out of water. The booming population and industry growth, coupled with declining water supply, have many parts of the state on a path to severe shortages in the coming decades.

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Drought has already transformed some regions of the state with significant economic consequences. In the Rio Grande Valley, the \$300 million citrus industry has been crippled by lack of water. Along the Gulf Coast in Corpus Christi, the massive petrochemical complex faces water shortages as soon as next year.

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According to the 2022 state water plan, Texas will face a water deficit of at least 7 million acre-feet by 2070. (An acre-foot is the amount of water needed to cover an acre of land to the depth of a foot, or about 325,000 gallons.)

Here's what you need to know:

## **Water issues vary by region of the state**

The state's water supplies and needs vary widely by region.



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West Texas, which relies primarily on groundwater, has seen agriculture and a booming oil and gas industry deplete those reserves. As Central and North Texas have swelled in population, rivers and aquifers are being stressed.

And Houston is facing an enormous backlog of infrastructure repairs. Its pipes leak more than 30 billion gallons of water annually, for example, enough to supply the entire city of Fort Worth.

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By 2060, municipal water use will surpass agriculture as the state's largest consumer of water. Much of that water goes to irrigate lawns.

"There needs to be more serious cultural changes on how Texans relate to water," said Robert Mace, the executive director of the Meadows Center for Water and the Environment at Texas State University.

## **Lawmakers earmarked billions in new water funding**

This year, Texas lawmakers made shoring up the state's water supply and infrastructure [a legislative priority](#) after Texas Gov. Greg Abbott called for a Texas-sized investment in water security.

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In November, [voters approved](#) a constitutional amendment to dedicate a portion of the state's sales tax revenue to water infrastructure and supply projects, earmarking a total of \$20 billion over two decades.

Half of the money will go towards developing "new" water, such as pipelines and desalination plants. The other half will be used to fix deteriorating infrastructure, like leaky water pipes that waste billions of gallons annually.

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The money will be allocated by the Texas Water Development Board, which vets projects proposed by sixteen regional water groups. The board's three members are appointed by Abbott.

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Experts say the new funds are only a drop in the bucket of what's needed. An analysis from the think tank Texas 2036 estimated that the state will need to spend \$154 billion on water infrastructure over the next 50 years, including \$59 billion to access new water supplies and another \$95 billion to fix deteriorating drinking water systems and broken wastewater infrastructure.

## **Desalination plants are off to a rocky start**

The state water plan, published every five years by the Texas Water Development Board, anticipates that more than half of the state's future water needs could be met through conservation — by using and losing less water.

But conservation has a limit, Mace said. “We should be using water more efficiently, but that's not going to solve all our problems. And so we're going to have to bring water in to meet our water needs. That water has to come from somewhere.”

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For Mace, that somewhere is the Gulf of Mexico. According to projections by the water development board, seawater desalination will account for 4.4% of the state's total water supply by 2030.

But in communities along the Gulf Coast, seawater desalination projects have faced significant local pushback. This fall, the [Corpus Christi city council voted to stop work](#) on a long-planned seawater desalination plant, citing ballooning costs and environmental concerns – even as the city faces imminent water shortages.

A private [company is seeking state approval](#) to build a seawater desalination plant in Texas City that would provide fresh drinking water to Harris and Galveston counties. The project is in the early stages.

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**Fights are brewing over the rights to groundwater**

Groundwater stored in sprawling underground aquifers supplies [Texas with half of its water](#). San Antonio — the state's second most populous city — gets all of its water from aquifers. In rural Texas, 99% of drinking water comes from below ground.

And yet the officials tasked with managing that groundwater are often operating in the dark, without localized data or modeling to inform exactly how much they can pump before the water runs out.

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As supplies dwindle, the question of who gets to pump that groundwater — and how much of it — is already sparking conflict for local officials and state lawmakers.

Earlier this year, a Dallas investor's proposal to [export massive amounts of groundwater out of East Texas](#) caused one powerful lawmaker to push a near-total overhaul of how Texas regulates groundwater. That included overturning a 120-year-old doctrine known as the rule of capture, which gives landowners an almost absolute right to pump groundwater below their property, no matter how that pumping impacts their neighbors.