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Texas is running out of cheap water, and will need to make salty water sweet

Texas faces a costly water crisis as growth, drought and industry outpace freshwater supplies statewide, writes columnist Chris Tomlinson.

By **Chris Tomlinson**, *Columnist*

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Crews line up pipes as part of the 150-mile joint Integrated Pipeline project designed to move water from

Julio Cortez/Associated Press. Cattle stock, state lawmakers recently acknowledged. A draft of the 2027 State Water Plan says Texas will need to spend \$174 billion to meet the water needs of the next 50 years, double 2022 estimates. [Show More](#)



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Texas is running out of cheap water, and will need to make salty water sweet

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Texas is outgrowing its freshwater supply.

Communities across the state need billions of gallons more water for growing populations and thirsty industries like oil and gas fracking, computer chip etching

and artificial thinking. What happens this summer in Corpus Christi is a sign of what's coming for all Texans.

The price of creating freshwater and keeping the economy growing will leave consumers with sticker shock, state lawmakers recently acknowledged. A draft of the 2027 State Water Plan says Texas will need to spend \$174 billion to meet the water needs of the next 50 years — twice as much as lawmakers estimated just four years ago.

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“The taxpayer is going to pay for this stuff one way or the other, be it property tax or be it fees, or be it insurance cost increases,” state Sen. Charles Perry, chairman of the

Senate Water, Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee, said during a hearing last week. “There is no free lunch here, or if they don’t pay, we end up with a Third World state.”

Tomlinson's Take

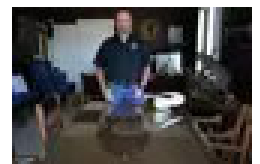
Texas mayor charts unique path to balance growth and affordability



Greg Abbott wants Corpus Christi to build Big Oil an expensive water plant



Texas is running out of water — and Corpus Christi is the first warning sign



Inconvenient truths

Lawmakers will need to have “a big conversation” when they gather in Austin next year, Perry predicted. The level-headed Lubbock Republican is not prone to hyperbole or known for rhetorical flourish. When he speaks up, Texans best listen up.



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Droughts and floods have complicated life in Texas for eons. The population and economy only began to grow once people started damming rivers and drilling into aquifers. But experts say those water sources are insufficient for a growing state.

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Corpus Christi is the canary in our coal mine. The city's surface water supplies are running low, new groundwater wells have disappointed, and citizens can't afford to make seawater drinkable.

In the City Council's drive to attract industry and bring in new jobs and revenue, it stretched the water supply too thin. Now that the inevitable drought has arrived, the council will likely declare an emergency and impose strict rationing.

Experts told the Senate committee on May 11 that while 57% of city-owned water utilities say they have long-term plans with sufficient funding, 10% have no plan, and 43% do not have enough money.

This year was the first time the State Water Implementation Fund for Texas fell short, capable of providing only \$1.28 billion of the \$4.2 billion that water utilities requested. The Legislature created the fund 11 years ago to help local authorities pay for water projects.

The Texas Water Development Board, which administers the fund, rejected the Nueces River Authority's request for help financing a Corpus Christi desalination plant, claiming it had to prioritize other projects.

Statewide, Texas doesn't know where it will find 10 million to 12 million acre-feet of the 17 million the state will need over the next 50 years, Perry warned (an acre-foot is about 325,000 gallons). Making existing water treatment plants and pipelines more efficient will only meet 3% of the need.

"If I have to pick between spending all of my dollars on leaky pipes or all my dollars on supply, I will pick supply every day," Perry said.

Water users will need a lot of dollars.

Well runs dry

Producing drinking water from ground or surface sources typically costs between \$1.10 to \$4.30 per 1,000 gallons, according to the Texas Comptroller's Office.

Desalination costs range from \$7.50 to \$11 per 1,000 gallons.

“Everyone in the audience is going to say, ‘That’s too much, that’s double what we’re paying,’” Perry said. “But that’s the cost of new water in Texas ... we have run out of the cheap water.”

If Texans will pay those rates, utilities will deliver. Companies are working to permit three seawater desalination plants, with state officials anticipating seven plants along the coast over the next decade.

Arid nations around the world use desalination, but in addition to requiring a lot of energy, they produce a brine that is twice as salty as the water going in. If the waste stream isn't handled properly, it can cause severe environmental problems.

Critics question the wisdom of trying to grow Texas beyond what its natural resources can sustain. Community activists want to prioritize residents' quality of life over industrial development, and environmentalists want conservation over development.

Sid Miller, the Republican agriculture commissioner, called for a moratorium on data centers to conserve water.

“They draw massive volumes of water for cooling, even amid ongoing drought,” Miller wrote in [a press release on Monday](#). “Rural communities that have conserved resources for generations now compete with corporate giants.”



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Should a higher power grant South Texans' prayers and bring a week or more of steady rain, a heaven-sent storm will not solve the state's long-term water shortage. We'll still need to turn salty water sweet.

"We have a lot of poor people that aren't going to be able to live in Texas much longer if we don't figure this out, and there needs to be a sense of urgency about it," Perry warned. "The status quo has to break."

Award-winning opinion writer Chris Tomlinson writes commentary about money, politics and life in Texas. Sign up for his "Tomlinson's Take" newsletter at houstonchronicle.com/tomlinsonnewsletter or expressnews.com/tomlinsonnewsletter.

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Chris Tomlinson

BUSINESS COLUMNIST



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In 2025, Tomlinson was inducted into the Texas Institute of Letters, an honor society that recognizes distinctive literary achievement. In 2021, the Texas Association of Managing Editors awarded him columnist of the year, and the Headliners Foundation named him Texas's Star Opinion Writer. He's authored two New York Times Bestsellers, "Forget the Alamo: The Rise and Fall of an American Myth" and "Tomlinson Hill: The Remarkable Story of Two Families Who Share the Tomlinson Name - One White, One Black."

Before joining the Houston Chronicle in 2014, he spent 20 years with The Associated Press reporting on politics, economics, conflicts and natural disasters from more than 30 countries in Africa, the Middle East and Europe.

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