

Oklahoma's comprehensive water plan approved

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Published: October 18th, 2011

NORMAN – Oklahoma's \$15 million comprehensive water plan has been finished and approved, the executive director of the Oklahoma Water Resources Board told a group of water experts Tuesday morning.

Speaking at the 32nd annual Governor's Water Conference, OWRB chief J.D. Strong said state officials are now turning their attention to implementing the controversial plan.

The document, which is actually an update to previous state water plans, was approved by a unanimous vote of the nine-member OWRB board Monday. The water plan includes information from the state's 13 watershed planning regions and more than 3,500 pages of technical and policy assessment, Strong said.

Linda Lambert, OWRB chairwoman, said the water plan was a foundation for the state's future water policy.

"This plan is the result of five years of dedicated work by water board staff, numerous state and federal partners, and stakeholders and countless other Oklahomans in laying the crucial groundwork for Oklahoma's water future," Lambert said in a media release announcing the board vote. "Recognizing the substantial role that water plays in our everyday lives and in our state's economic sustainability, this plan represents a firm foundation upon which we can build a lasting legacy for Oklahoma."

On Tuesday, Strong acknowledged the controversial nature of the plan, but called for the implementation of its recommendations.

"Eight recommendations are offered up as high priorities," he said. "Some are controversial, but all will be challenging to address and implement. It will prove far easier to do this now than if we wait and defer action."

Strong said the plan was the most thorough, well-vetted water plan in the nation.

Some state lawmakers, however, disagreed.

In May, state Rep. Brian Renegar, D-McAlester, joined three other lawmakers in a letter to Attorney General Scott Pruitt regarding the work done by CDM, a consultant on the water plan. The group's letter asked Pruitt to determine the validity of the water plan and charged that CDM did not disclose contracts it had with the state of Texas and the Oklahoma City Water Utilities Trust at the same time the company worked on Oklahoma's water plan.

"This seems to be an ethical conflict of interest," the letter said. "CDM's contract required certificates of no lobbying activities, no conflicts of interest and no gratuities allowed."

On Tuesday, Strong said the plan offered lawmakers the luxury of developing solutions to future water problems in a thoughtful and rational manner.

"We now have an impressive collection of recommendations worthy of continued support and action," he said.

He said the water board's priority would be developing a way to address drinking water and wastewater infrastructure needs for the next 50 years. Those needs, the board announced in the spring, were projected at more than \$80 billion over the next half-century.

"We must develop a more robust program," Strong said. "Right now we can fund about \$4.3 billion – about 5 percent – in infrastructure needs over the next 50 years."

Lawmakers from southeastern Oklahoma called for changes in the makeup of the water board and questioned the water plan's call for new groups to be funded through the OWRB.

State Sen. Brian Crain, R-Tulsa, said he would like to see the OWRB's board of directors changed to include representatives from each of the state's 13 water districts. Crain said he also opposed the creation of new planning groups, a recommendation included in the new water plan.

"The OWRB has called for the development of several planning groups across the state," Crain said. "But that just seems like more bureaucracy. I think it would be easier, and less expensive, if we simply changed the way the water board was composed. I'm not sure I see the need for that (planning groups), especially during a time when funding is so tight."

Strong said the OWRB's plan should be implemented to help protect against future water problems.

"You can't drink a plan," he said. "We may have a great plan in front of us, but we have a lot of work to do to make sure we implement that plan."

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