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Opinion: It's time for a water session at the Legislature

Jennifer Walker and Suzanne Scott

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There are now over 30 million Texans. The state crossed that landmark in mid-2022, gaining the most new residents of any state in the nation, with projections of an additional 25 million people living in Texas by 2050.

All that growth is taking its toll on the state's finite and fragile water resources. Groundwater, which supplies most of our state's drinking water, is now being extracted at twice the sustainable rate and less than 2% of Texas streams remain free of significant chemicals from wastewater discharge.

Increased climate variability is compounding things. After a decade of unprecedented flooding from Houston to the Hill Country, the last few years have brought a deep drought. Scientists forecast an era of Texan megadroughts in the coming decades. Intense storms and deeper aridity are making a home in modern Texas. We need to prepare.

We cite these facts not in despair, but because drought and flood have a history of spurring much-needed action and innovation from the Texas Legislature. The historic drought of the 1950s produced a landmark legislative session in 1957 that created the Texas Water Development Board and set Texas on a forward-facing water planning trajectory. Three years of drought in the mid-1990s led to a 1997 session that created Texas' robust regional water planning process — widely admired for its attempt to incorporate extensive public participation. Years of flooding capped by the shocking deluge of Hurricane Harvey in 2017 led to the creation of the Flood Infrastructure Fund and the regional flood planning process during the 2019 session.

Altogether it's a uniquely Texan call-and-response cycle that's spurred some remarkable policy innovation. It deserves to be renewed this spring.

How can lawmakers seize the momentum and make 2023 a water session?

A generational investment in Texas' fragile water infrastructure is one starting point. The state averaged at least seven boil water notices per day in 2022 and a new study shows it's losing a lot of water every year due to leaky pipes—a volume large enough to meet the annual water needs of the cities of Austin, Fort Worth, El Paso, Laredo, and Lubbock combined.

Unprecedented federal infrastructure funds are available for Texas to begin to fix this problem. Lawmakers can ensure maximum drawdown of federal funds by appropriating the required state match. They can also replenish the successful Flood Infrastructure Fund and aggressively invest in reducing leaky pipes and equip state agencies to better monitor and report on statewide water loss.

Upgraded physical infrastructure can only get us so far, however. Texas also needs to fund better science and expand its expertise at the state agencies entrusted with managing our increasingly volatile water resources. In addition, Texas counties currently lack basic authority to protect residents from floods and manage limited groundwater resources. As a starter, lawmakers need to provide fast-growing counties the authority to put in place modern and protective building codes, establish drainage utilities and assess drainage fees.

Finally, the Legislature needs to acknowledge and invest in the critical role that nature plays in allowing us to live well with water. Solutions such as habitat restoration, green infrastructure, and land conservation provide not only critical flood protection, but also recreational opportunities, scenic value, improved air and water quality, carbon sequestration, sustainable agriculture and wildlife habitat. With undeveloped land fast disappearing, it's time for a bold vision from the Capitol. Lawmakers need to establish and fund a new Land and Water Conservation Fund to harness the protective value of nature.

These are, of course, simply starting points. We have laid out a fuller water vision for the 2023 session as part of our work with the Texas Living Waters Project — a coalition focused on ensuring Texas has the water it needs for thriving communities and abundant fish and wildlife.

Unprecedented development, drought, and deluge call for a response from our elected leaders. It's time to renew a long Texas tradition and make the 88th Legislature a water session to remember.

Walker is director of the Texas Coast and Water Program at the National Wildlife Federation.

Scott is state director for The Nature Conservancy in Texas.

