

OPINION

3/31/96



SAN ANGELO
STANDARD-TIMES

The opinion page of the San Angelo Standard-Times is intended to be a forum for the discussion of and comment on current topics and issues.

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In our opinion

Hickory resolution should be negotiated

Water is such a precious commodity that even neighbors have long fought over rights to it. Such a squabble has been building for years between San Angelo and communities to the east served by the Hickory Aquifer, even though it might be decades before any sharing actually occurred.

San Angelo officials, faced with an acute water shortage in 1971, purchased from two families in McCulloch County the right to draw water from the aquifer beneath several Central Texas counties, including McCulloch, Menard, Kimble, Mason and San Saba.

Much happened after that. First came substantial rains that eased the crisis. And then came approval, construction and the extraordinarily fast filling of Ivie Reservoir.

With local lakes in good shape and generous rights to Ivie, local residents in recent years have been able to breathe easy about their water needs for the first time in many years — perhaps ever.

But in West Texas it's not possible to ever be entirely confident. And the dry spell that has parched the region for months is a reminder that planning ahead for water not only is wise, but essential.

There is no guarantee that Ivie always will have enough water to permit San Angelo to pump its allowable amount. Indeed, some say it's not a question of whether Ivie will be dry one day, but when. So the city wants to make sure the Hickory water is

available when it's needed.

Not surprisingly, the people who benefit from the aquifer now want to ensure that their supply is safe. The Hickory Underground Water Conservation District was created after San Angelo's purchase of the water rights, and the two governmental entities have squared off in court.

A 1991 ruling favored San Angelo, but didn't resolve the ultimate question: How much water can San Angelo take?

Water district rules approved recently limited San Angelo to 2,750 acre-feet of water, less than one-fifth the water city officials say they are entitled to. The decision upset both San Angelo, which wouldn't gain enough water to warrant the expense of developing the well field and building a pipeline, and Brady, which doesn't want San Angelo to have unrestricted access even to that much water and went to court to overturn the rules.

Past attempts to negotiate a settlement have failed, and the issue seems destined to be determined in the state courts, perhaps at the highest level.

San Angelo already has invested about \$6 million toward the project. It must pursue the matter as long as is necessary, and appears to have the legal high ground. For a resolution that best benefits all sides, and to avoid heightened conflict between two areas that otherwise enjoy close ties, the Hickory district and Brady ought to seek a mediated settlement with San Angelo.