SUBJECT: Requiring Texas Water Development Board to study seawater desalination

COMMITTEE: Natural Resources — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 8 ayes — Puente, Callegari, Hope, Campbell, R. Cook, Geren, Hamilton, Hardcastle

0 nays

1 absent — Wolens

WITNESSES: For — None

Against — None

On — Leonard Olson, Texas Water Development Board

DIGEST: HB 1370 would require the Texas Water Development Board (TWDB) to study the development of cost-effective water supplies from desalination of seawater and to pursue federal funding for desalination projects in Texas. TWDB would have to issue a biennial progress report on the implementation of seawater desalination in Texas. The report would have to include:

- results of TWDB studies and activities on seawater desalination;
- an evaluation of research, regulatory, technical, and financial obstacles to seawater desalination projects;
- an evaluation of the state's role in developing large-scale seawater desalination projects; and
- the anticipated general revenue appropriation necessary to continue studying seawater desalination in the next biennium.

The bill would take immediate effect if finally passed by a two-thirds record vote of the membership of each house. Otherwise, it would take effect September 1, 2003.

SUPPORTERS SAY: HB 1370 would require TWDB to study a promising new approach to providing Texas with a drought-proof water supply to help meet future water

needs. The State Water Plan indicates that Texas' total demand for water will increase by 18 percent over the next 50 years, while available supplies will fall by 19 percent. The plan recommends desalination to help bridge the gap. Planning for several significant desalination projects already is underway, including a groundwater desalination plant in El Paso. Gov. Perry also has called for increasing Texas' water supplies through desalination.

The bill could jump-start efforts to make desalinated seawater a viable part of a stable water supply for communities along the coast or elsewhere. A number of desalination technologies already have been developed. A large reverse-osmosis seawater desalination project in Tampa, Fla., is expected to produce desalinated water at a cost of about $2 per 1,000 gallons. Although the cost of seawater desalination is decreasing, more research is needed to make the technology a cost-effective means of increasing water supply.

HB 1370 would not detract from water conservation efforts. Meeting Texas' future water demand will require both increasing water supply and curbing usage through conservation. Moreover, seawater desalination can alleviate the need to increase water supply through environmentally harmful measures, such as building expensive new dams or reservoirs.

OPPONENTS SAY:

Although seawater desalination could help to increase Texas' water supply, the state should not be distracted from pursuing other measures to meet water needs, such as increased water conservation. Also, any study of seawater desalination should address potential environmental concerns, such as the impact on water quality of the disposal of brine concentrate or the energy source used to fuel the desalination process.

NOTES:

The bill's fiscal note indicates a general revenue cost of $15,450 in fiscal 2004. TWDB estimates that this cost could be absorbed within the agency's existing resources.

The companion bill, SB 743 by Lucio, was reported favorably as substituted by the Senate Natural Resources Committee on April 14 and recommended for the Local and Uncontested Calendar. CSSB 743 is identical to HB 1370. The House Natural Resources Committee originally recommended sending

HB 1370 to the Local and Consent Calendars Committee, which transferred the bill to the Calendars Committee.