

Desalination plant would let area pool its resources

By **GLENN KRAMPOTA** | Posted: Thursday, October 20, 2011 2:00 am

If the Great Texas Drought of 2011 — in which Brazoria County has been a full participant — hasn't convinced area residents of the urgent need for water planning, perhaps nothing will.

The Brazosport Water Authority, a provider to seven member cities, two prison units and Dow Chemical Co., is convinced there's no better time than now to act. General Manager Ronnie Woodruff has gotten the go-ahead to establish a water master plan featuring a desalination plant.

Recently, the BWA board heard an hour-long presentation on desalination from Camp Dresser & McKee Inc., the engineering firm that will be developing the master plan for BWA and built an El Paso desalination plant that processes brackish well water.

The desalination idea isn't a new one for Brazosport. Dow and the city of Freeport teamed up for just such a plant in the 1960s.

The before-its-time venture proved to be cost-prohibitive and not a critical necessity. Building such a plant might still be extremely costly — and something area water district voters likely would need to approve in a bond issue election — but no one can seriously argue the need for additional water sources isn't crucial.

Several weeks ago, big chunks of Texas finally received substantial rainfall. A meteorologist with the National Weather Service estimated Texas got an average of about 2 inches of rain during the short, but welcome, rainy spell.

That snapped a streak of seven months in which precipitation levels were among each respective month's 10 driest on record. And forecasters say weather patterns for 2012 project to be similar to those of this year's record-breaking drought and heat.

The technology for desalination plants has come a long way since the 1960s. The U.S. Navy has used the process for many years for "forces afloat, Marine Corps expeditionary forces and humanitarian missions ashore," according to dailyscience.com. In 2004, delivering drinkable water for ships at sea and Marines ashore for less cost and less energy became a priority. Today, reverse osmosis desalination plants supply most Navy ships.

The development of the BWA master plan will cost \$80,000 and take up to eight months. Even if a desalination plant is approved, the permit and construction process would mean there still would be about a 3 1/2-year wait before salt water is pumped in from the Gulf to be dispensed from your tap as drinking water.

The idea of a new desalination plant has been kicked around for a long time, and a number of area

officials have increasingly stressed the urgency of addressing future water needs. Vying with other areas of expanding growth for increasingly few sources or trying to conserve our way out of problems won't be the answer.

If action is taken soon, it could turn out the drought's been a blessing in disguise. And the construction and operation of a desalination plant certainly would mean more jobs.

Recent rains along with cooler temperatures have eased current demand, but don't change the long-term outlook. We need to take a fresh look at utilizing salt water.

Today's editorial was written by Glenn Krampota, features editor for The Facts.