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Opinion Columnists

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Texas' water challenges even cross international boundary

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Away from the more demanding war against terrorism, President Bush faces another tricky foreign policy question: How hard should he or his State Department press Mexico to release its share of water into the Rio Grande?

Mexico and the United States created a treaty in 1944 to put water into the river that separates the two nations. They update the pact every five years.

But Mexico hasn't paid its full share since the last five-year cycle began in 1997. In fact, as of Sept. 30, it had fallen behind by 1.4 million acre-feet since 1992. (An acre-foot equals the amount of water required to submerge an acre in one foot of water.) In the year that just ended Sept. 30, Mexico missed its mark by about 250,000 acre-feet.

The shortfall hurts Texas agricultural producers in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. It also harms farmers in Northern Mexico. Both depend upon the river.

Some people in both regions also are fuming because Mexico's interior reserves had enough water in July to make up for this year's shortage. Mexican officials hear those complaints but cite droughts and other reasons as why water stays in their reservoirs.

Mr. Bush has discussed the deficit with President Vicente Fox. And Gov. Rick Perry has pressed it with Mexican counterparts. But how much will they keep pushing, especially since the Sept. 30 deadline has passed? Mexico was supposed to honor much of its water debt by then.

The dynamics get tricky here. The United States wants Mexico's support in the war against terrorism. And both nations have talked

about major immigration reforms. But how much political capital will the president spend on this issue?

The Mexico question isn't Texas' only water issue. The Texas Water Development Board has approved 16 regional water plans. Together, they form a strategy for Texas' water needs until 2050.

But, as always, turning words into action is more difficult. The governor, plus many other state officials and communities, face delicate questions.

For example, will state lawmakers follow the Water Development Board's recommendation and help rural or poor communities finance water projects? No one expects the state to do it all. But will it pay its fair share?

The question grows complicated in a declining economy, where state revenue isn't likely to overflow in the 2003 Legislature. What's more, Texas must get going on basic water projects.

The Water Development Board estimates the state needs up to \$17.8 billion to acquire new water supplies before 2050. Overall, the state may need \$108 billion by then for its water needs.

And here is another tricky part. The state's 50-year water plan relies upon groundwater districts to manage Texas' crucial aquifers. But will those districts have enough power, especially since the rule of capture allows Texans to pump as much water as they like?

Specifically, will legislators give groundwater districts the power to determine the longevity of aquifers? That authority will help the state better understand the likely life of underground water sources.

Fortunately, Texans can influence the discussion through directing their views to the Water Development Board. The water plan now awaits public comments, which can be given to Phyllis Thomas at the Texas Water Development Board (512-463-3154).

Texans also can get a jump-start on the state's water demands through approving a constitutional amendment on the Nov. 6 ballot. Proposition 19 asks voters to consider expanding a longstanding bond fund that the state uses to help smaller communities finance water projects.

The fund has helped many towns that have trouble raising money in

capital markets. The state raises the money, then loans it to the town, which repays the state.

That scenario has worked remarkably well since the 1950s. Voters would be foolish to turn it down. They should consider it a down payment on Texas' longer-term water needs, which only will become more important. Like it or not, as Texas grows, so will pressure on this vital natural resource.

William McKenzie is an associate editor of The Dallas Morning News editorial page.