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Legislators tackle water use in Texas oil fields

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A climate scientist warned legislators Wednesday that Texas summers are likely to get longer and drier, setting the stage for a hearing on how oil and gas producers use water in a state that remains in varying stages of drought.



(Photo: Zach Heller Photography)

"Freshwater is going to be more scarce," Gerald North, professor of atmospheric science and oceanography at Texas A&M University, told members of the energy resources and natural resources committees, recommending they prepare for a future with more storms on the magnitude of Hurricanes Katrina and Ike, and more droughts similar to the one in 2011.

Rep. Jim Keffer, R-Eastland, chairman of the energy resources committee, acknowledged that the current oil drilling boom has been good for the Texas economy but said the Legislature can't ignore public concerns over water use.

"We have to make sure we are using the least amount of freshwater we can," he told Cody Pomeroy, general counsel for the Texas Oil and Gas Association, who said 21 percent of water used by drillers now is brackish or recycled water.

The industry accounts for about 1 percent of total water use in the state, Pomeroy said.

Agriculture is the single largest user of water in Texas.

Stephen Jester, an environmental engineer at ConocoPhillips, said his company has cut freshwater use in the Eagle Ford Shale by 45 percent over the past three years, although he acknowledged the costs associated with recycling water continue to make it a challenge.

"There are always two questions we hear," he said. "What are you doing to get more trucks off the road, and what are you doing to use less freshwater?"

Representatives from other companies offered similar stories.

Michael Dunkel, director of sustainable development at Pioneer Natural Resources Co., said his company is working to reduce evaporation.

"It's not glamorous, but it might work better," he said.

Pioneer, like other producers, now uses brackish water instead of freshwater to fracture wells when it can.

But brackish water isn't available in all parts of the state and Rep. Lyle Larson, R-San Antonio, noted that several cities in West Texas are considering brackish water as a source of drinking water.

Recycling could be one solution, but Brent Halldorson, chief operating officer of Fountain Quail Water Management and one of the leaders of the fledgling Texas Water Recycling Association, said he opposes requiring drillers to use recycled water.

Halldorson instead said he supports tax incentives; he said an association task force is working on a proposal.

In the meantime, representatives of several companies said they continue to make progress.

Dunkel said Pioneer expects to recycle 10,000 barrels of water a day by the end of the year in the Permian Basin.

"That's going to cost us money, but it's a first step," he said.

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