

Sierra Club sees conflicts of interest in water plan

City official, engineer for reservoir consider consultant impartial

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By JIM GETZ / The Dallas Morning News

Environmentalists say the consultant Dallas hired to independently create a long-range water plan looking at all options instead partly relied on an engineering firm that has a contract to design a huge reservoir in East Texas.

Beth Johnson and Rita Beving of the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club also said that the engineer, Freese & Nichols, has a conflict of interest in shaping a 16-county plan for a North Texas regional water planning group because construction of that reservoir – Marvin Nichols, named after one of the company's founders – is part of that plan.

The city's director of water utilities and the engineer said no conflicts exist.

Ms. Johnson said in a news release that Dallas had "desired an independent review by an independent consultant to develop a plan that has Dallas' own interests at heart. Yet we now know that the analysis relies instead on the very consultant with Freese & Nichols who stated in a radio interview that his firm would be the one to get the Marvin Nichols Reservoir design contract."

Bob Johnson, director of Dallas Water Utilities, said consultant Ed Motley of Chiang, Patel & Yerby has done the job independently. Mr. Johnson noted Mr. Motley had to rely on figures provided to him on existing reservoirs: "To say he wasn't independent by talking to Tom Gooch would be to say the same thing about every reservoir he's looked at."

Mr. Gooch, who has been the point man for Freese & Nichols in various water discussions, said it is common in Texas for firms that design water systems to advise governments and the state's 16 water-planning regions.

"If you try to find a firm in this area that didn't do water-supply work, you'd be selecting one without water-resource expertise," he said. "If you decide you're going to make ineligible anybody with expertise, you're going to do the state a lot of harm."

Lois Finkelman, chair of the Dallas City Council's Health, Environment & Human Services Committee, wished for a "greater disconnect" but added, "I think that the council will recognize that connection and it will be taken into account as we move forward."

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