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## Watershed Moment: City of Lufkin has deal to purchase Kurth Lake, paper mill's water wells

By JESSICA SAVAGE  
The Lufkin Daily News



Saturday, February 14, 2009

The City of Lufkin plans to purchase Kurth Lake and AbitibiBowater's 13 water wells for \$15 million — a move Lufkin Mayor Jack Gorden called "the single largest event to secure the future of Lufkin."

City officials in late January signed a letter of intent to obtain the company's rights to both ground and surface water in Angelina County. The company shuttered its Lufkin paper mill in 2003.



Andy Adams/The Lufkin Daily News (ENLARGE)

The city of Lufkin has agreed in a letter of intent to purchase Kurth Lake, shown here, 13 water wells and water rights to the Angelina River from AbitibiBowater. The city will get 1,759 acres of land, including the 800 acres covered by Kurth Lake, in the deal.

In recent years, water has become a highly sought-after commodity across the state. City officials say the purchase of AbitibiBowater's water rights would greatly benefit Lufkin.

"It puts the city in one of the most envious positions in the state," said City Manager Paul Parker.

The paper mill has 13 water wells, 10 of which are active. Kurth Lake and eight of the wells are on the northern side of Angelina County, in the Redland area. Two of those wells are already tied to the Lufkin water system, which was arranged years ago for emergency situations, such as a drought.

A spokeswoman for the mill said the company was pleased to be in negotiations with Lufkin for the sale of its water rights.

"We along with the city recognize that this represents a real opportunity to provide for future water needs for residents as well as the ability to capitalize on economic development opportunities," said Debbie Johnston, AbitibiBowater director of public affairs and government relations, U.S. operations.

Johnston said the company's remaining properties off state Highway 103 east — namely, the paper mill itself — are still up for sale.

"The company is committed to completing the sale with the land and the property to ensure there will be some future economic activity at the site," she said.

The pending transaction with the city is for 1,700 acres of land off Rivercrest Road. That includes 800 surface acres, or 5,278 million gallons, of water in Kurth Lake — a reservoir used to hold water from the Angelina River. Two pumping stations are also a part of the purchase, including an Angelina River intake pumping station, which pumps water from Angelina River into Kurth Lake for storage, and a Kurth Lake intake pump station that pumps water out of the lake to storage tanks at AbitibiBowater. The tanks are also part of the deal.

The most intriguing aspect of the pending purchase, city officials say, is the boost it could bring to the Lufkin job market. Millions of gallons of raw and treated water could pique the interest of an industrial company that relies heavily on water usage, Gorden said.

"Not only would this provide our residents with an adequate water supply, but it will give us another tool to use in attracting new businesses that will bring new jobs to our city," the mayor said. "For an industrial development in the future, that's a tremendous plus."

If the deal goes through, residents can expect to see an increase in their water and sewage rates — part of a \$17 million bond already approved by Lufkin City Council to fund the AbitibiBowater purchase and a state-mandated upgrade of the city sewage system. Those rates will be far less over time than previously expected, according to Keith Wright, Lufkin assistant city manager.

For years, the city has planned to one day pump water from Sam Rayburn Reservoir as the city's need for water increases. It purchased rights to the lake in the 1960s, providing the city access to 28,000 acre feet of water a year. However, officials estimate it will cost \$80 million to extract that water because of extensive water treatment required for surface water. Groundwater is less expensive to treat than surface water in accordance with state public water standards. The Sam Rayburn project would involve the costs of building a water treatment facility and pumping that water from the lake to the treatment facility and into Lufkin. While the city still has that option, the project is not expected to materialize for decades now that the city is purchasing the mill's water rights,

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Wright said.

"The Abitibi purchase would allow us to increase our usage, gradually tapping into (Sam Rayburn) usage," he said. "It is a valuable resource that we could not let go."

Retired NASA engineer Walter West, who lives along Sam Rayburn, has publicly opposed the city's pumping of that lake. In a 2006 letter he submitted to a regional water development board, West wrote of the community's use of Sam Rayburn for recreation and tourism, as well as a place where retirees settle. Pumping water from the lake to low levels would inhibit that attraction to the lake in the future, he said. He suggested then that the city or county look into purchasing water rights from the idled paper mill for use to avoid pumping from the lake.

Upon hearing Thursday about the city's pending purchase of mill's water rights, West said, "That's all good news."

The acquisition of Kurth Lake could bring more recreational benefits to the community, according to city officials. In the past, AbitibiBowater has sold fishing licenses and rented The Lodge, a building overlooking the lake, for public use, Parker said. Although Parker did not know how the lake will be publicly used in the future, he said that topic is something that will go before city council members.

"There's a lot of potential there," Parker said.

Another option the city would have with the mill's water rights is the ability to lease out those rights to a another city or entity in need, Parker said. The decision to lease rights would also be up to city council members. Lufkin currently has the ability to pump 17 million gallons of water a day. The mill acquisition would allow the city to pump five times that amount, city officials say.

However, one immediate change Lufkin residents can expect, if the deal goes through, is better water, Wright said. Water wells on the northern end of the county, where the mill's wells are located, provide water with a low sulfide concentration. Residents who have complained for years about the sulfur smell in their drinking water can expect to see an improvement in their water, Wright said. The sulfur smell is most prevalent during drought periods in the summer months. Wright said Lufkin has a plan to switch its pumping to the northern water wells, which pull groundwater from the Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer, to improve the water quality during those months.

Like city officials, Lufkin council members echoed the belief that the mill's water rights purchase is within the best interest of the community.

"Small, rural cities like Lufkin face an extremely difficult political battle with larger metropolitan areas over this precious resource," said city council member Phil Medford in a press release issued by the city after The Lufkin Daily News began inquiring about the planned water rights purchase. "The city was faced with this unusual opportunity, and I believe we have acted in the best interest of the taxpayers to take advantage of it."

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By Merry Smith

Feb 15, 2009 2:02 PM | [Link to this](#)

More expensive water? To buy back wells so that they will make Lufkin 'more attractive' for future businesses? They already exist; if they make Lufkin so attractive, why can't Abitibi sell directly to such a business instead of the city? Why should Lufkin take on such a burden right now in this economic environment? Sounds like another sweetheart deal between Lufkin City Council and Abitibi--just like all those tax abatements. Way to go.

By Galen Drake

Feb 15, 2009 5:57 AM | [Link to this](#)

If the water rights could possibly be leased by another city or entity, would our water bills be decreased? If not, Why?

By Randall B. Palmore

Feb 15, 2009 5:54 AM | [Link to this](#)

The purchase of Kurth Lake, and the papermill water wells is one of the smartest things the City of Lufkin has done in years...It is a great opportunity!! Water in the future will be one of the most valueable commodities on the face of earth...If you don't believe it, buy yourself a single bottle of water from a convenience store, and compare what you paid for it to a gallon of gasoline.

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