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Watts Wasting Texas Water

How coal and gas power plants guzzle billions of gallons every year and how we can transition to a more secure water future

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Executive Summary

When Texans think about energy, they likely think about gas, coal, solar, or wind. It's likely that few folks think about water. But most of our state's thermal* power plants depend on significant amounts of water as they burn fossil fuels to boil water and create steam. Decades ago, this might have been an acceptable cost of producing electricity, but Texas now faces drought, water shortages, and declining river and stream flows in all reaches of the state.

Maintaining the status quo for power-generating water users forsakes the huge possibility offered by renewable energy and battery storage, which use negligible amounts of water. As the Trump Administration and Texas policies aim to use gas and coal to power an AI boom that regular Texans don't seem to want, it's more important than ever to examine thermal plants' water usage.

To determine the enormity of water resources dedicated to Texas coal, gas, and nuclear plant operations, this report analyzes [water consumption data](#) from the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA). **The numbers are staggering: Texas coal plants consumed 34 billion gallons of water in 2024, while plants**

running primarily on gas consumed another 56 billion gallons, and the state's two nuclear plants consumed 26 billion. The total water consumption of thermal plants in Texas has totaled roughly 100 billion gallons or more every year since at least 2015.

And the kicker is: EIA's consumption data reflects only water that is used up for cooling, not the total water needed for these plants to function nor the total water the owners have the rights to seize. To uncover this bigger picture, we analyzed a patchwork of Texas water rights documents to shine a light on the true water impact of coal-burning power plants. This revealed that **seven Texas coal plants can store 98 billion gallons, and all Texas coal plants have rights to consume 116 billion gallons every year from our rivers, creeks, and aquifers.**

Texas is at a crucial fork in the road in deciding just how serious we will get about looking for water solutions. Thankfully, as we outline in the closing section of this report, power plant owners and Texas decision-makers can take several common-sense actions to stop wasting the very resource we can't afford to waste.

*Thermal power plants use heat energy to generate electricity.



Fayette Coal Plant Train | Al Braden

Introduction

Texas in the 1970s and 1980s was a very different place. Other than Bill Clements' two wins, a Democrat had occupied the governor's mansion for over 100 years. Gasoline was usually under 20 cents a gallon. Our population numbered only 16 million in 1985, and these folks and our businesses got much of their electricity from coal-burning power plants. After all, the fracking revolution was one to two decades away, and solar energy wouldn't reach utility scale for another three to four decades. Burning oil was costly and dirty, and hydropower was expensive. Coal was the most affordable option.

During these two decades, utility companies built 15 coal plants across Texas. At its peak, the state had 20 operating coal plants, producing more coal-powered energy than any other state and releasing thousands of tons of health-harming pollution into our air and water every year. Coal came in by rail from other states, mainly Wyoming—about 1,000 miles away—and some plants used even dirtier Texas-mined lignite. But this coal boom required something in addition to underground deposits of carbon-rich rock: These plants desperately needed immense amounts of water.

To feed this need, Texas coal plant owners created 12 huge reservoirs—Calaveras Lake, Lake Fayette, and Martin Lake, just to name a few. The Texas government gave these companies a claim to our waterways, changing Texas rivers and creeks forever, to capture billions of gallons every year, for free. A handful of other plants didn't have reservoirs and required billions of gallons of groundwater.

Fast forward to present day: Over 31 million residents live in the Lone Star State. Gas is up to

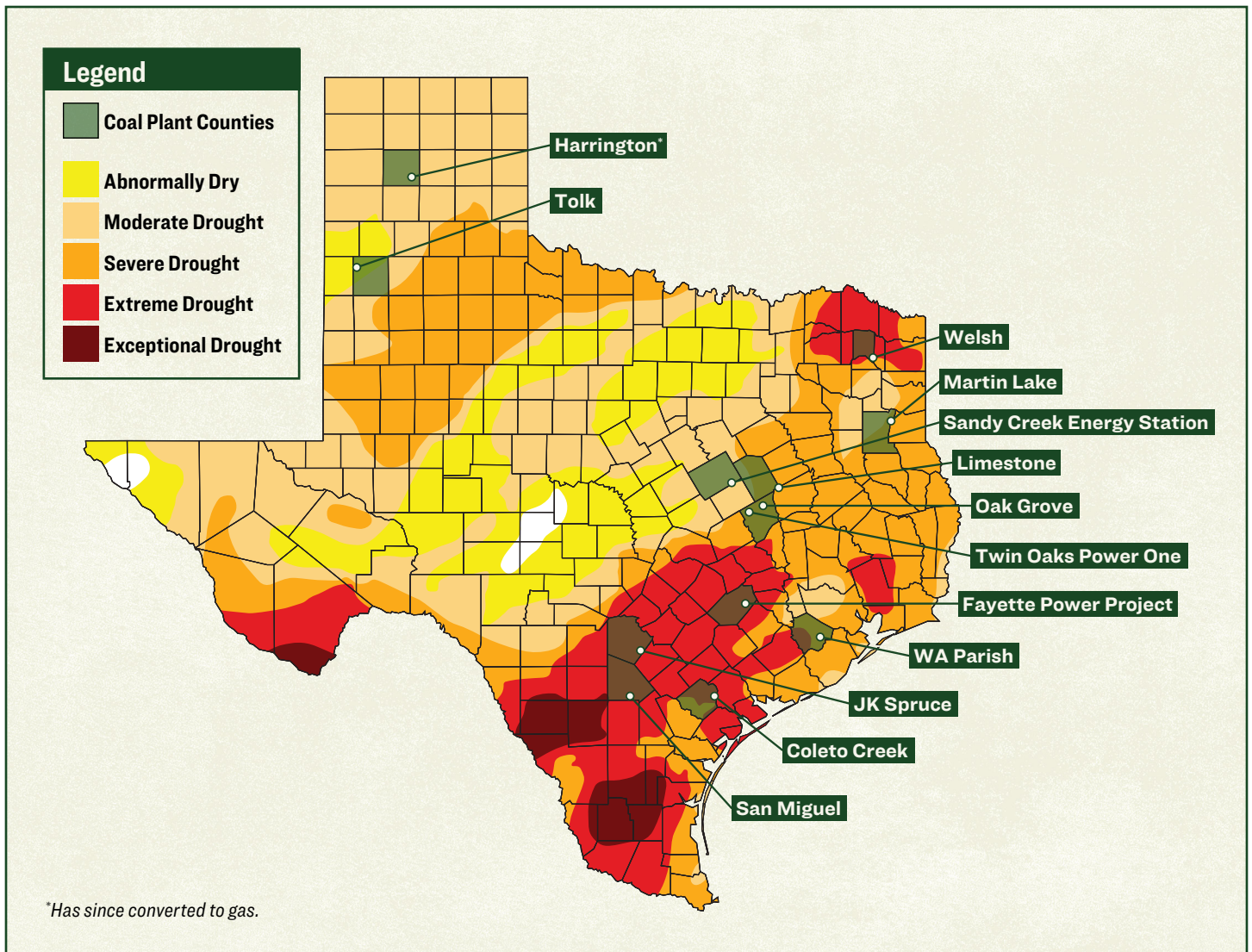


Figure 1: Texas Coal Plants in Relation to Drought Conditions (as of March 2026)

\$3.80 a gallon due to President Trump’s Iran War. Democrats have lost the governor’s race for over 20 years. Water resources are scarce in many parts of the state, due to population and industrial growth paired with the impacts of climate change, including warmer temperatures and less rainfall. In fact, many of our streams and rivers are declining and slowing down, and the draft 2027 Texas State Water Plan estimates that Texas could face a water shortage of 1.2 trillion gallons as soon as 2030.

In the meantime, Texas has become a national leader on utility-scale wind, solar, and battery storage and meets more of its electricity needs with these resources than with coal. Yet, we’re still running 12 coal plants (see Figure 1), more than 47 U.S. states. And these plants are still chugging our precious water

resources to operate. Fueled by the fracking boom, the state’s many gas plants also guzzle away significant amounts of water every year. Renewables and battery storage, on the other hand, use negligible amounts of water.

Renewables have not been an adequate part of the water conversation. Many of the state’s water shortage strategies are time-consuming and exorbitantly expensive, ranging from desalinating seawater to buying water from out of state to building pipelines to take water from one community to feed another’s unchecked growth. When we analyze just how much water Texas coal and gas plants use to operate, while low-to-no-water options exist, it’s clear that our state must stop clinging to dirty, water-hungry power generation.

Water at Every Step

Most thermal power plants—whether coal, gas, or nuclear—use huge amounts of water to create energy. In fact, coal plants in Texas depend on water just as much as they depend on coal from the ground.

All coal plants produce energy by burning piles of coal underneath large pipes filled with water (see Figure 2). The fire's heat causes the water inside the pipes to boil and turn to steam, building up pressure to turn turbines that power a generator. Depending on the type of technology used, many gas power plants operate in a similar way. The generator produces electricity that is sent to the grid via transmission lines. But what happens to all that steam?

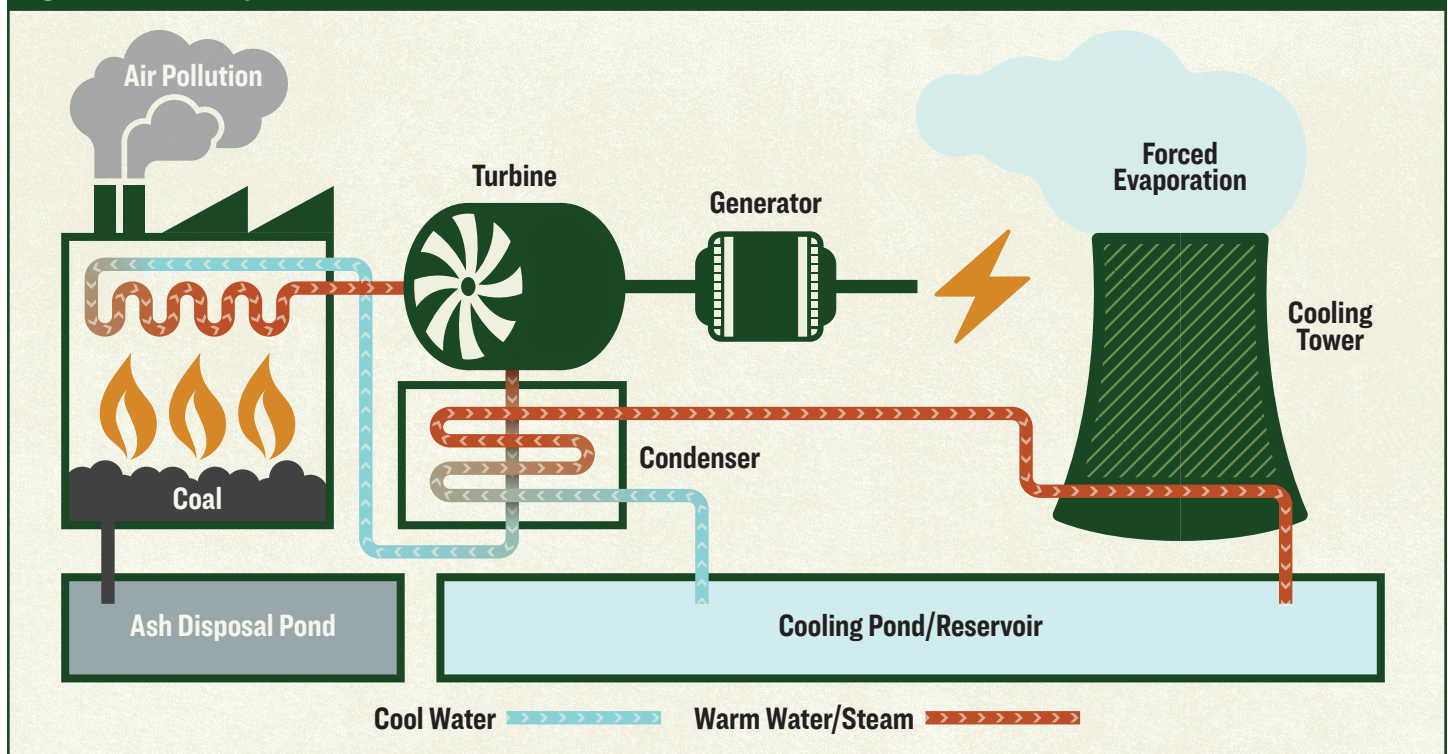
If a coal plant made no effort to cool the steam and turn it back into water, its water losses would be astronomical, much like a kettle left to boil off on the stove. So modern power plants condense the steam back into water. After leaving the boiler and turning the turbines, the superheated steam enters a condenser, where a different stream of cool water absorbs some of the steam's heat so that the steam returns to liquid and circulates back to the boiler.

In any season, a plant needs huge amounts of cooling water to turn steam back into boiler water. After doing its job, that cooling water can be as hot as 94°F and must be cooled to be reused. At this point, the plant will lose some of its water forever.

About half of the coal plants in Texas forcibly evaporate some of the warm cooling water in cooling towers. (Coal plants emit their massive amounts of health-harming air pollution through different towers, called stacks.) The other half of Texas coal plants pump the warm cooling water into large open-air ponds, where it recirculates and slowly cools, but some also evaporates (see Figure 3). This is why utilities built so many reservoirs in the '70s and '80s.

Significant forced evaporation—which is water that is lost from the system forever—happens from both cooling systems. Hot Texas summers increase

Figure 2: The Journey of Water Inside a Coal Plant



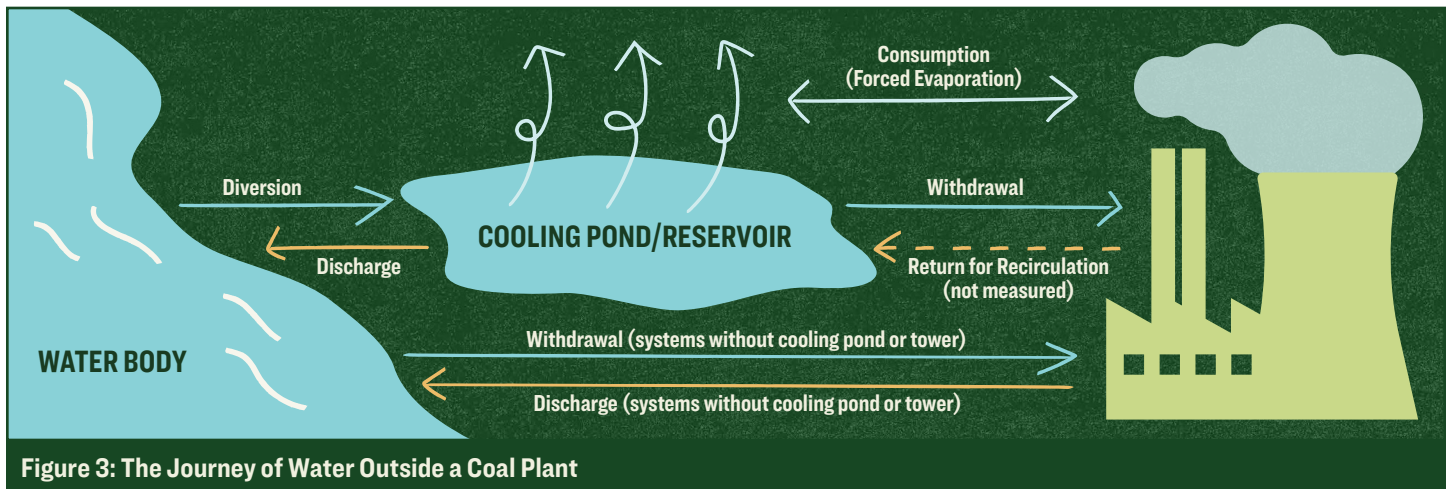


Figure 3: The Journey of Water Outside a Coal Plant

water losses because the whole system is hotter. In any case, most losses occur because of the power plant process, not due to natural evaporation. When water is used up and gone, it is called consumption. While the term consumption in this report reflects only the water that is lost during cooling, the even larger amount of water that is used for recirculating or reused in the plant is also largely unavailable to the public supply.

The Consumption Numbers Are Staggering

Using data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) Forms [860](#) and [923](#), the Sierra Club analyzed water consumption by thermal power plant operations in Texas and the entire United States. This analysis of coal, gas, and nuclear plants is available to the public via an [online dashboard](#).

In 2024, the most recent year for which [complete data is available](#), Texas coal plants consumed a staggering 34 billion gallons of water. Plants running primarily on gas consumed another 56 billion gallons, and nuclear plants consumed 26 billion, for a thermal plant total of 116 billion gallons consumed in a single year.

Thirty-four billion gallons for coal is a lot of water. It is 26 billion gallons more than the 8 billion gallons [directly consumed by Texas' 400+ data centers for cooling](#)—and it was consumed by just 13 coal plants operating in 2024 (one has since converted to gas). This would provide enough water for [1 million homes every year](#), which represents 10% of the [total number of households](#) throughout the Lone Star State and is as many homes as a city twice the size of Austin. It amounts to filling up 52,000 Olympic-sized swimming pools—or 44 Dallas Cowboys stadiums—every year.

Though coal power provided just 12% of [the state's power needs](#) at the end of 2024, its water consumption represented 31% of electricity-related statewide water consumption that year (see Figure 4). Gas power plants, which supplied 51% of the state's electricity in 2024, made up 48% of Texas' total electricity-related water consumption.

The infographic features a grid of 44 white stadium icons on a dark green background. The text reads: "Texas coal plants consumed 34 billion gallons of water in 2024, which is enough to completely fill 44 Dallas Cowboys stadiums." The stadium icons are arranged in three rows: the first two rows have five icons each, and the third row has four icons.

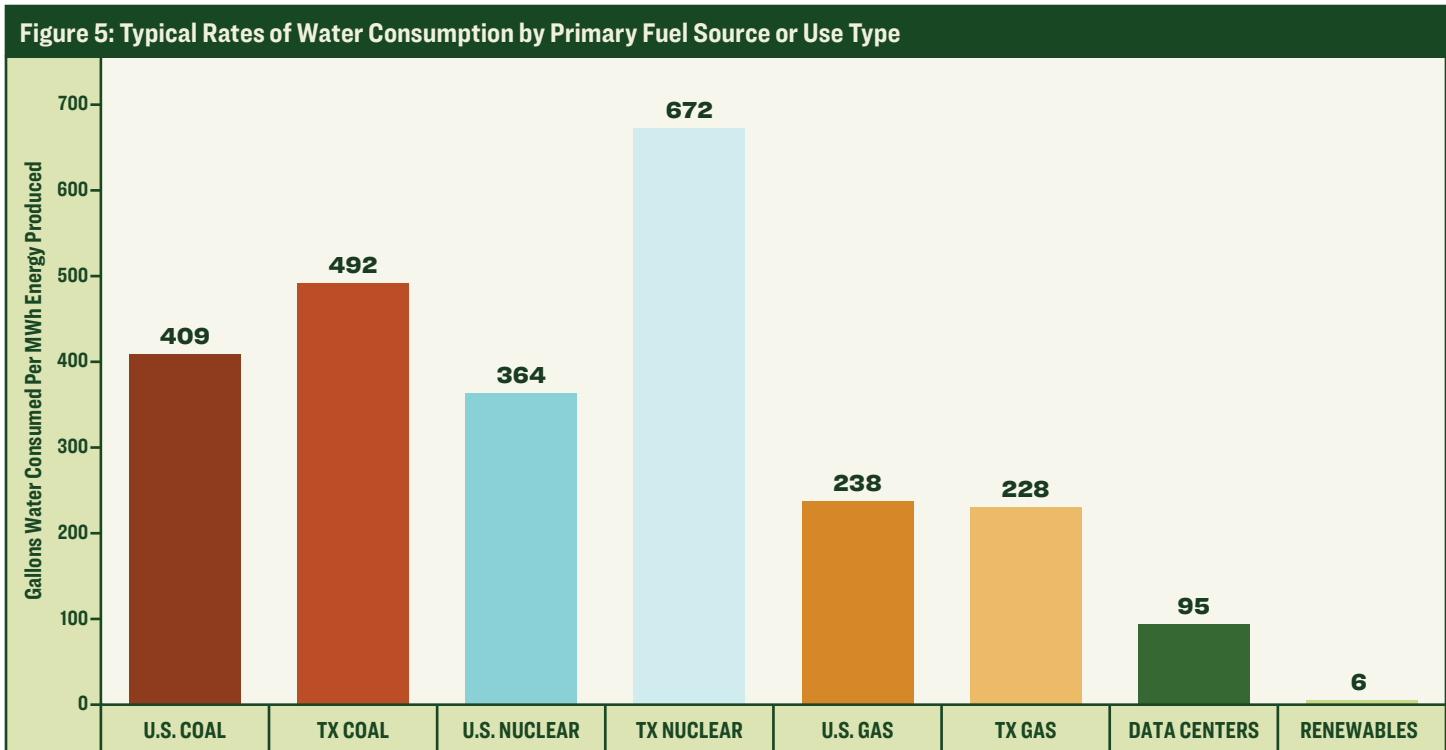
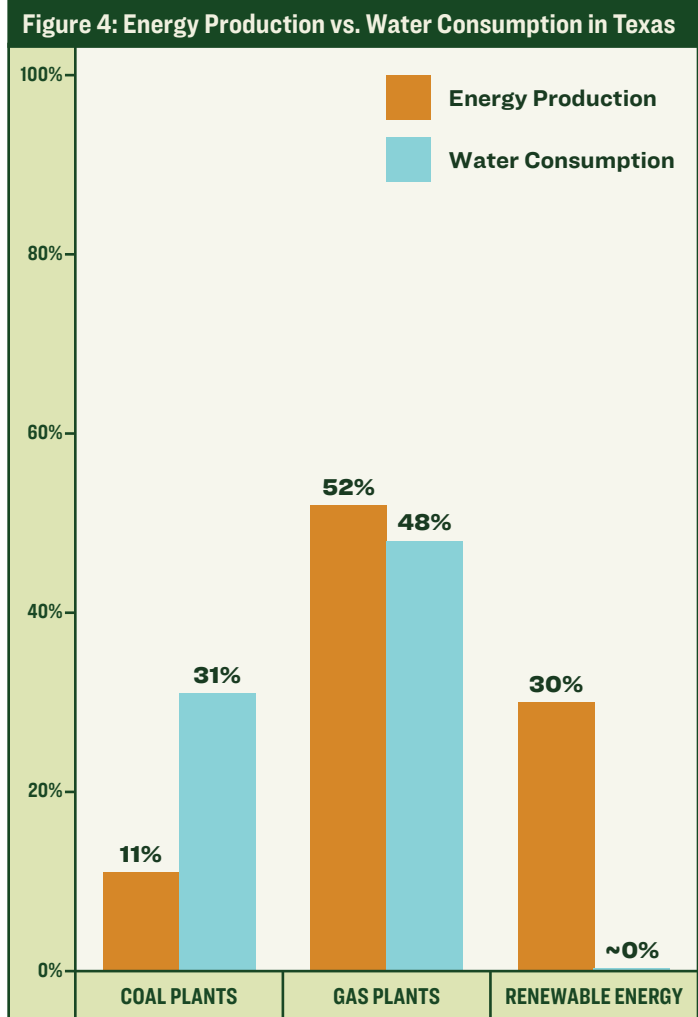
Renewable energy, meanwhile, supplied 30% of the state’s total electricity needs at the end of 2024, with solar at 8% and wind at 22%. But because wind and photovoltaic solar farms generate power without steam or cooling systems and thus need minimal water to operate, EIA doesn’t even bother to track their water usage.

Producing power with solar panels requires an estimated 6 gal/MWh or less, while wind and battery storage use little to none. Compare that to the inefficiency of Texas and U.S. thermal plants, which consumed from 228 gal/MWh on the low end to as much as 672 gal/MWh of net generation (see Figure 5). Large-scale usage of controversial carbon capture and storage (CCS) would only worsen these numbers, potentially “doubling the water footprint of humanity.”

Biggest Losers

All coal plants in Texas lose significant amounts of water, but some lose more than others (see Figure 6). The amount of water a coal plant uses can vary based on a number of factors, such as the age and efficiency of the boiler, type of cooling system, and how and when the plant operates. While the average coal plant in Texas consumes just under 500 gallons/MWh, some reported consuming far more.

Several coal plants that operated for all of 2024 have since announced planned retirements, and





Onsite Gas Plants For Stargate Data Center in Abilene | Rick Baraff

all but one are planning to transition to burning gas, which uses much more water than renewables.

- Coletto Creek, planned for retirement [in 2027](#).
- San Miguel, planned for retirement at the end of 2027.
- Welsh, planned for gas conversion in 2028.
- J.K. Spruce, planned for retirement [in 2028](#).
- Talk, planned for retirement in 2029.

Meanwhile, Harrington in Potter County in the Panhandle, has completed its transition to gas. Only San Miguel is planning to [transition away from fossil fuels to renewable energy](#), a smart choice for water-strapped South Texas.

America is in the middle of an energy, pollution, and water nightmare, where tech companies’ data centers require massive amounts of energy. The Trump Administration is propping up old, dirty coal plants around the nation to greenlight this AI boom, increasing the pollution in our air and water and [costing ratepayers millions of dollars a day](#). Gov. Greg Abbott, meanwhile, is [marketing Texas as “the epicenter of AI development.”](#)

Texas risks losing billions of gallons of water savings every year if coal plants remain open and we continue building so much new gas. In fact, the amount of water wasted by Texas coal plants is even more astounding when we analyze the total water they’re allowed to have on hold for their processes to function. Those numbers, while difficult to track down, tell an even bigger story.

Figure 6: 2024 Water Consumption by Texas Coal Plants, Highest to Lowest

Coal Plant Name	Owner	Location	2024 Water Consumption	2024 Consumption per MWh
J.K. Spruce	CPS Energy	Bexar County	6.7 billion gal.	1,100 gallons/MWh
Fayette Power Plant	City of Austin and LCRA	Fayette County	4.8 billion gal.	668 gallons/MWh
W.A. Parish	NRG	Fort Bend County	3.5 billion gal.	351 gallons/MWh
Oak Grove	Luminant	Robertson County	3.5 billion gal.	323 gallons/MWh
Martin Lake	Luminant	Panola and Rusk counties	3.5 billion gal.	359 gallons/MWh
Limestone	NRG	Limestone County	3 billion gal.	554 gallons/MWh
Harrington	Xcel Energy/SPS	Potter County	1.6 billion gal.	719 gallons/MWh
Welsh	SWEPCO	Titus County	1.6 billion gal.	374 gallons/MWh
San Miguel	San Miguel Electric Cooperative	Atascosa County	1.3 billion gal.	1,015 gallons/MWh
Tolk	Xcel Energy/SPS	Lamb County	1.2 billion gal.	630 gallons/MWh
Coletto Creek	Luminant	Goliad County	1.2 billion gal.	455 gallons/MWh
Twin Oaks	Armadillo Power LLC	Robertson County	1.1 billion gal.	520 gallons/MWh
Sandy Creek	Sandy Creek Energy Associates, Riesel Holdco LLC, LCRA	McLennan County	865 million gal.	285 gallons/MWh



W.A. Parish Coal Plant and Smithers Lake | Rick Baraff

Rights Gone Wrong

Most coal plant owners in Texas long ago set their sights on seizing water from the rivers and creeks that once flowed so abundantly across our state. Plants that utilize groundwater have sometimes run into problems, such as the Tolk coal plant in the Texas Panhandle, which opened in 1982 using water from the Ogallala Aquifer. As Ogallala levels declined, owners SPS/Xcel Energy looked seriously at the plant’s future. In 2023, [Xcel decided](#) to close Tolk four years earlier than expected, saving more than a billion gallons of water every year.

Because surface water [is owned by the state for the public](#), potential users must first seek permission to divert, impound, or consume surface water from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ). Once a person or business secures a water right, it’s theirs in perpetuity. And, the older the right, the more priority it has in times of drought. Throughout Texas history, the state has handed coal plant owners the rights for massive quantities of our surface waters—for free. For utility companies, this means significant profits and little incentive to conserve water.

Seven Texas coal plant owners currently have rights to impound, or store, water in massive reservoirs and to use that water for plant operations. Using [TCEQ’s Water Rights Viewer](#), we located active water rights near coal plant reservoirs and read through pages of amendments to assess current impoundment rights, which are often clearly described and unlikely to significantly change over time.

Just seven coal plants in Texas have rights to impound 98 billion gallons in reservoirs (see Figure 7). This is water that has been removed from stream and river flows and put on hold for coal plant operations, often for cooling purposes that result in significant evaporative water losses. Even though this consumption represents only some of the reservoir’s

water, the plant uses all of the water in the reservoir and, for the most part, makes it unavailable to most other users. Some of the reservoirs are off limits to the public, while others actively invite recreation despite the plants releasing health-harming toxins like mercury, particulate matter, sulfur dioxide, nitrous oxides, and more. This coal pollution has been attributed to many illnesses, developmental disabilities, and [half a million deaths](#) in the U.S. over two decades.

While assessing actual consumption is fairly straightforward, determining how much water plants are *allowed* to consume is much less so. Multiple water rights and purchase agreements can exist for a single plant, amounts frequently increase through amendments, and inconsistencies appear across documents. Still, Sierra Club pursued a thorough analysis of total water consumption rights for the 13 Texas coal plants that were operating in 2024. First we used [TCEQ’s Water Rights Viewer](#), and then we cross-referenced the [TCEQ active water rights spreadsheet](#). Because we found inconsistencies between the two sources, we read through pages of amendments to arrive at what appears to be the currently permitted amounts. For those plants using groundwater, purchased surface water, or effluent, we used consumption numbers reported to EIA or available contract water amounts.

This analysis revealed that Texas coal plants have rights to consume 116 billion gallons of water every year from local rivers, creeks, and aquifers (see Figure 7). Even if they are getting the water from a reservoir, that man-made containment must be filled using original surface waterways. Because water rights depend on availability, this total represents the amount of water they have permission to place on hold for their operations if that amount is available. Even if utilities do not use all of it, the right has been dedicated to this purpose and is unavailable, in most cases, for other users. We have highlighted three plants' water rights in this report.

NRG's Parish Coal Plant on the Gulf Coast

In the late 1950s, Houston Lighting & Power Co. built the first four units of the W.A. Parish plant in Fort Bend

County and constructed a 6-billion-gallon reservoir to feed the plant. In the late '70s and early '80s, the company added four coal-burning units, becoming one of the largest coal power plants in the nation. According to [water rights documents](#), the state of Texas also gave the company the rights to consume 11 billion gallons of water every year. These rights would later become the property of Reliant Energy and then NRG. The reservoir, Smithers Lake, is totally off limits to the public.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg. NRG owns an additional water right and also entered into a purchase agreement allowing it to divert and use even more water from the Brazos River. In total, NRG has the rights to totally consume 40 billion gallons of Texas water each year—likely more than any other coal plant in Texas. NRG's water rights for gas plants are likewise high: In nearby Chambers County, [TCEQ gave NRG](#)

Figure 7: Texas Coal Plant Water Rights

Coal Plant Name	Annual Consumption Rights	Impoundment Rights	Documents
W.A. Parish	40.3 billion gal.	6.1 billion gallons	Parish Water Rights
Fayette Power Plant	20.2 billion <i>from LCRA and City of Austin rights for Lake Fayette + Baylor Creek Reservoir, which is yet to be built</i>	24.1 billion gallons <i>just for Lake Fayette</i>	Fayette Water Rights - LCRA Fayette Water Rights - COA
Spruce	12 billion gallons	20.6 billion gallons	Spruce Water Rights
Martin Lake	8.1 billion gallons <i>+ any additional Sabine River water purchased through contract</i>	18.4 billion gallons	Martin Lake Water Rights Old City of Dallas Contract
Coletto Creek	7.9 billion gallons	11.4 billion gallons	Coletto Creek Water Rights
Limestone	7.1 billion gallons <i>from NRG's contract with the Brazos River Authority to supply its steam-electric plants in Limestone County</i>	n/a <i>purchases Lake Limestone water from the Brazos River Authority</i>	NRG's Lake Limestone Contract <i>page 510</i>
Welsh	5.5 billion gallons	7.7 billion gallons	Welsh Water Rights
Sandy Creek	4.9 billion gallons <i>from contract with Waco Metropolitan Area Regional Sewerage System</i>	n/a <i>uses municipal effluent</i>	Sandy Creek - Waco Metropolitan Area Regional Sewerage System Water Contract <i>page 11</i>
Oak Grove	4.3 billion gallons	9.9 billion gallons	Oak Grove Water Rights
Harrington	1.6 billion gallons <i>EIA reported consumption</i>	n/a <i>uses municipal effluent</i>	n/a <i>no contracts found</i>
San Miguel	1.3 billion gallons <i>EIA reported consumption</i>	n/a <i>uses groundwater</i>	n/a <i>uses groundwater</i>
Tolk	1.2 billion gallons <i>EIA reported consumption</i>	n/a <i>uses groundwater</i>	n/a <i>uses groundwater</i>
Twin Oaks	1.1 billion gallons <i>EIA reported consumption</i>	n/a <i>uses groundwater</i>	n/a <i>uses groundwater</i>

[rights](#) to completely consume 9.7 billion gallons a year for its Cedar Bayou gas plant.

Fort Bend County, meanwhile, is in a [severe drought](#) and surrounding counties range from abnormally dry to extreme drought. In recent years, places like Missouri City have instituted [mandatory water conservation measures](#) on residents.

According to the [Region H Regional Water Plan](#) (the region that includes Parish), steam-electric water users, a.k.a. thermal power plants, will soon experience water shortages, and several water user groups will be short by a total of 129 billion gallons per year as soon as 2030. Region H's long-term strategies range from conservation to desalination to treating wastewater. The plan never mentions clean and renewable energy sources, which use little water.

Luminant's Martin Lake Coal Plant in East Texas

One of the biggest and most polluting coal plants in America—Martin Lake—sits on a massive reservoir in East Texas. In 1971, Luminant's predecessor, the Texas Utilities Electric Co., dammed a tributary of the Sabine River to create the Martin Lake reservoir for its coal plant. Luminant [now owns these original rights](#) to impound 18 billion gallons and to totally consume up to 8 billion gallons a year.

Beginning in 2006, Luminant (called TXU Generation Company at the time) entered into a separate [water supply agreement](#) with the City of Dallas to buy 5.5 billion additional gallons of water from the Sabine River and Lake Fork and transport that via pipeline to the reservoir. Again, in 2013, Luminant [projected a deficit](#)



Colorado River During Drought | Al Braden

at the plant and [increased this contract water](#) to 10 billion gallons. At this point, Luminant likely had rights to 28 billion gallons of water annually. Luminant filed for bankruptcy in 2014, Vistra then bought Luminant, and the City of Dallas contract likely expired. Still, Luminant [maintains a right](#) to import into Martin Lake “an unspecified amount of contract water from any source” that it needs for the coal plant.

Panola, Rusk, and surrounding counties are currently in states of severe and [moderate drought](#), and the water this region does have is in high demand. The region's [water planning group](#) expects shortages for new gas plants coming to East Texas and plans to remedy this by drilling wells to seize groundwater. Meanwhile, as the Dallas-Fort Worth population swells, some municipalities in DFW, which also use water from the Sabine River, are looking to create the [Marvin Nichols Reservoir](#) in Northeast Texas, much to the concern of some [local residents](#).

LCRA's Fayette Coal Plant East of Austin

In 1975, LCRA [obtained](#) the state's permission to impound two huge reservoirs and divert 24 billion gallons of water every year from the Colorado River to help feed the Fayette coal plant outside of La Grange. To date, LCRA has constructed only one of these reservoirs but maintains the right to construct the second despite deadlines typically being required.

In 1999, the co-owner of this dirty coal plant, the City of Austin, contributed its own water rights for Fayette's operations, at [an additional 7.8 billion gallons](#) of water from then-called Town Lake that could be consumed every year. Today, our estimates show that LCRA and the City of Austin have rights to consume a combined 31.8 billion gallons of water from the Colorado River for power plant purposes.

Most of Fayette County is [currently in extreme drought](#), with surrounding areas in extreme or severe drought, and the region is expecting water shortages as high as 103 billion gallons. Yet the Lower Colorado Regional Water Planning Group [estimates that](#) Fayette will require the same amount of water far beyond its expected lifespan. Meanwhile, this region's water planners have discussed securing just 9.8 billion gallons of potable water a year through a \$3.5 billion desalination project—the most expensive in the state that wouldn't come online until 2060. LCRA, which refuses to commit the Fayette coal plant to retirement despite the City of Austin desiring it, is also proposing yet another [reservoir](#). The 1,000-plus-page [2026 Region K Water Plan](#) mentions renewable energy, which uses negligible amounts of water, zero times.



Sheep Grazing at Texas Solar Farm | Enel North America

What Happens Next

To sustain and improve the health of its people, wildlife, and beloved waterways and river basins, Texas must look in every nook and cranny for potential water savings. The unpopular data center boom makes this more urgent than ever.

Thermal power plants in the state have consumed roughly [over 100 billion gallons](#) of water or more every year since at least 2015, and our analysis of water rights suggests that Texas coal plants alone have rights to consume an annual total of 116 billion gallons. Leaning more into renewables and battery storage to power Texas would reduce air and water pollution and save our state billions of gallons of water every single year. Getting there will largely depend on our state officials as well as the power companies themselves.

Water Rights Holders

Those significant water rights bestowed to plant owners so long ago give utility companies much power to decide what happens next. By retiring their coal plants and making a strong shift to renewables, utility companies could embrace the Texas Water Bank, administered by the Texas Water Development

Board (TWDB), to sell this water to other users, ideally with a portion dedicated to the environment.

As the climate changes and Texas' population grows, the water available for nature, recreation, and even irrigation of our food supply decreases. Less water in our streams, rivers, and lakes jeopardizes public health by leading to potential pollution overload and harms wildlife that depend on our water flowing. The Texas Water Trust, housed at TWDB and managed by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), provides an option for water rights holders to transfer unneeded rights, which they obtained from the state for virtually no cost, for dedication to environmental protection. This would let more water stay in Texas waterways, supporting wildlife, recreation, and our bay and estuary systems for generations to come. And it would avoid a repeat of [what happened at Fairfield Lake](#), where Luminant sold its former coal plant reservoir—and the

associated water rights—to wealthy Dallas developers, obliterating a Texas state park in the process.

No matter which route they take, it's essential that coal-owning companies work with TCEQ and the Texas Railroad Commission to clean up and remediate any waterways and land surrounding a coal plant to ensure public and environmental safeguards.

State, Regional, and Local Decision-Makers

Because wealthy utility corporations aren't known for doing something just because it's right, state agencies must step up.

The Public Utility Commission of Texas should assess current and future water use of coal plants through a report with TWDB, similar to [the upcoming study](#) on data center energy and water use, which could provide information for the PUC's statewide planning work. The PUC also could prioritize stronger programs for energy efficiency and demand response, which would help us meet our electricity needs without using water.

The TWDB, meanwhile, should allow for the careful consideration and assessment of potential power plant retirements' impact on water use and the role of water-wise renewable energy. This is particularly timely because of the water threat posed by data centers' energy needs. The board just released the [draft 2027 State Water Plan](#) and is accepting public comment on it until the end of May. All regional water plans surveyed for this report reflect no water savings in line with inevitable, or even announced, coal plant retirements. This is likely because [TWDB's methodology](#) for steam-electric water demand suggests that regional groups hold “the projected water demand constant through 2080.” But this flawed methodology doesn't allow regional water planners to boldly confront pending water shortages. Though renewables could save tens of billions of gallons every year, not a single plan mentions solar or wind energy or battery storage, despite some of these regions expecting steam-electric water shortages.

TCEQ has clear authority according to the [Texas Government Code](#) to correctly deal with unused water rights. The agency should immediately assess unused and consistently underused water rights and consider cancellation if the lack of use spans 10 years or longer. TCEQ should also work with TWDB and TPWD to

consider how “freed” rights could be quickly reserved and utilized for environmental flows through the Texas Water Trust and Texas Water Bank. Realizing the wide variations in the amounts of water power plants use per MWh of generation, stricter TCEQ requirements could force thermal generators to be smarter with the usage and invest in more efficient cooling technology.

TCEQ should also be much more aggressive in pushing coal plants to reduce their air and water pollution, especially by creating stronger rules for coal ash wastewater and coal ash landfills and requiring all coal plant discharge permits to indicate zero discharge of pollutants by removing heavy metals and toxins with a filter or membrane.

The Legislature, which will convene in 2027, should require TCEQ to assess unused water rights and begin cancellation proceedings. Legislators should also fund and direct a TCEQ analysis on more beneficial uses for freed water rights and appropriate funding for independent testing of potential groundwater contamination near coal plants. The Environmental Integrity Project and Earthjustice did something similar, [finding widespread contamination](#), but those studies are now over seven years old.

While Texas counties [don't have much power](#) to impact local energy projects one way or another, some rural areas are undeniably wary of solar and wind just as they are of data centers. But where data centers waste a lot of water, renewables save it.

As rural communities struggle to see some of their landscapes changing, residents and officials should consider just how much water renewables could save for future generations of Texans—from farmers to ranchers to kids needing creeks during hot summers. Coal and gas literally release tons of pollution year after year—and almost all 12 Texas coal plants are located in rural areas. These coal plants also cause climate change while wasting billions of gallons of water across our state every year. Renewables, on the other hand, don't pollute our communities and power our grid while barely using a drop.



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