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**Tiny fish threaten to sink Lubbock's big plans for reservoir**  
**ELLIOTT BLACKBURN**  
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Billions of gallons of water slated for Lubbock's future could be gulped by a couple of guppies.

City planners worry that two species of prairie fish - the small eye shiner and the sharpnose shiner - could muddy plans for a major reservoir outside Post and complicate a multimillion-dollar City Council decision expected to come later this year.

Neither of the species of small, silvery fish is considered threatened or endangered. But the reservoir that planners believe is important to the city's future water supply could push the rare, long-distance swimmers over the edge.

"I would be as confident as could be that anything, any of these populations upstream from that reservoir, would be gone," Texas Tech biologist Gene Wilde said. "It's just not a big enough piece of river."

Plans for the reservoir date back nearly 40 years, and it will take decades more to complete. Lubbock and other regional cities recently dusted off the proposal, concerned that drinking water supplies might not keep up with growth in the area.

Lubbock would impound water on the North Fork of the Brazos River, creating a lake roughly 60 percent of the size of Lake Alan Henry, another city reservoir. The proposed Post reservoir also figures into another major city plan - reusing wastewater heavily treated by both man and nature as a recycled source for Lubbock.

Planners believe the two lakes could almost completely supply Lubbock's current water demand, making the proposed reservoir a factor in a multimillion-dollar council decision later this year on a pipeline from Lake Alan Henry. The council could approve a larger, more expensive pipeline designed to carry water from both lakes, well before it is certain that the Post reservoir can be built, in order to avoid paying even more for the pipeline in the future.

But impounding water could wreak havoc on the shiners. The fish are used to the chaotic rhythms of the Panhandle water supply and need huge sections of open river.

Shiners seek exposed, shallow and sandy waterways. As salty or

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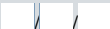
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brackish water from underground springs moves into one river section, biologists believe, the fish migrate to the next.

Shiners move farther upstream to lay eggs, which slowly float down the river until young fish hatch. Too little water, and the eggs don't float, causing them to die - if the fish aren't far enough away from a large lake, their brood feed the crappie and other fish that live in large reservoirs.

The Arkansas shiner, which achieved quick notoriety in the Panhandle two years ago after nearly complicating another major source of Lubbock drinking water, may travel more than 100 miles along the Canadian River during its normal 1.5-year life span - the equivalent of a human journeying from New York to Los Angeles, for swimmers not much longer than a finger, Wilde said.

They're no match for a massive concrete barrier across the river, and populations have already dropped off downstream, where dams have sliced the Brazos into smaller segments.

"These fish, even though they're only 2 inches long, require miles of river in order to play out their life history," Wilde said.

Even without federal restrictions or an endangered species listing, the presence of the fish can complicate the project. The Canadian River Municipal Water Authority feared federal restrictions on groundwater pumping due to the Arkansas River shiner, a species the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service tagged as threatened 13 years ago.

Pumping the aquifer could dry out springs that feed the shiner's habitat. Most of the water Lubbock has received so far this year from the authority, still the biggest supplier of city drinking water, has come from groundwater sources.

Federal authorities and groundwater officials made arrangements sidestepping restrictive pumping rules but preserving the habitat in 2006.

The Lubbock project could face a similar lawsuit from groups hoping to protect the shiners. New state requirements passed in the last legislative session that balance human water rights and river flows that keep aquatic ecosystems alive won't be hammered out in detail until 2012. As much as an eighth of the water set aside for humans could be required for discharge.

The uncertainty of how much water would have to be released troubles Deputy City Manager Tom Adams. But Lubbock is still working through the early stages of the project.

"Why would we spend significant funds to build a reservoir and then have to release the water and not be able to use it?" Adams asked. "It's probably not insurmountable, but it is new ground, and that's probably going to take some time to work through."

To comment on this story:

[elliott.blackburn@lubbockonline.com](mailto:elliott.blackburn@lubbockonline.com) 766-8722

[james.gallagher@lubbockonline.com](mailto:james.gallagher@lubbockonline.com) 766-8706

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