

## OPINION COLUMNIST

Writer on study of water pipeline replaced

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Texas A&M University has replaced the lead writer of a controversial water policy study commissioned, then delayed for months, by the city — a shakeup that could further delay the report as council prepares to vote on increased water rates. Councilman Ron Nirenberg requested a comprehensive study on San Antonio's long-term water security more than a year ago. Calvin Finch, the ousted writer, submitted a second draft in July. But city officials were displeased by "continued inaccuracies, outdated information, and opinionated statements within the draft," according to Deputy City Manager Peter Zaroni.

Mayor Ivy Taylor has insisted on a lengthy "committee vetting process" for the study. Finch's draft is critical of the San Antonio Water System's Vista Ridge project, a planned \$3.4 billion water pipeline from Bureson County that could raise the city-owned utility's rates by 16 percent.

Roel Lopez, director of the Texas A&M Institute of Renewable Natural Resources, will now take the lead and "reconcile all of the (city's) requested edits and finalize in a form to be made public," Nirenberg said. Finch "retired (from IRNR) after he turned in the last draft," Nirenberg added. On Friday, Lopez called Finch's draft "goeey." "It's like baking a cookie," he told me. "The cookie was pulled out halfway through the process. Is it goeey? Yes. It's not baked. We're in the process to continue the baking process."

Lopez wrote this week in a memo to city officials that Finch "seemed hesitant to submit his draft work through a scientific peer review process. "Instead, Dr. Finch stated his intent was to submit a 'final report' to Texas A&M and the City of San Antonio for their review and consideration," Lopez continued in the memo. "I explained to Dr. Finch that under that scenario, his 'final report' would not be final until the peer review process was completed by Texas A&M and I had approved the report. "Should you receive a draft report from Dr. Finch," he added in the memo, "please consider it (a) draft (i.e., from the desk of Dr. Calvin Finch) until the document has undergone our scientific review process as described above."

This week, Zaroni outlined in a memo to council members numerous “inaccuracies and omission of current facts” in Finch’s draft, which slams Vista Ridge as a “high-risk” project. These included “inaccurate statements suggesting SAWS would reduce its conservation goals due to the Vista Ridge Project (and) omitted facts that SAWS has contractual protections in place to ensure financial security of the Vista Ridge project.” The 142-mile pipeline is expected to begin transporting up to 16.3 billion gallons annually by 2020 from the Carrizo-Wilcox aquifer.

In his draft, Finch, who writes a freelance gardening column that appears in the San Antonio Express-News, explained why he’s wary: “The Vista Ridge project is rated a high-risk water supply because of the distance of the source from San Antonio, the number of regulatory agencies involved, the relatively short contract period, and the financial status of the major sponsor, Abengoa.” Finch appended a “special note” to his second draft acknowledging objections by SAWS to his analysis. But he defended his own criticisms. “The authors stand by their identification of pipeline length, treatments and financial status of water-project contractors as legitimate risk factors to consider,” he stated.

It’s unclear how the removal of Finch could affect the final draft of the study. “I think that remains to be seen,” Nirenberg said. “I met with Dr. Lopez the other day, and what I impressed upon him is that the most important need is for a comprehensive water plan that maintains independence and academic integrity.” Any edits made “outside of A&M” should be tracked, Nirenberg added, to ensure that “the author will be Texas A&M.” Lopez promised objectivity. “We’re a research institute,” he told me. “From our perspective, we want to ensure that it’s scientifically sound, that the information presented is factual and validated.” He could not, however, offer a date of completion. “We are pushing very hard,” Lopez said. “We are working through the weekends until we’re done. I can’t give you a hard date. We don’t want to compromise the process.”

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