

Water policy needs long-t

Voters should pick governing board to oversee water, power authorities

Puerto Rico has plunged into crisis mode regarding water supplies, a heightened level of the state of emergency that has hovered over the agency for a decade or two.

The latest round of rationing in the San Juan region is bound to put some ideas into the administration's collective mind, such as how to wring the island for everything it's got even if it means depleting the last pristine river.

But there are other approaches that have fewer short-term benefits, but staying power that can carry them into the next millennium. Here's one: Turn the governing board regulating the Aqueduct and Sewer Authority into an elected board with independent power that outlasts gubernatorial contests.

This would allow for continuity in an agency that has known a crisis was coming since at least 1984, when consultant Antonio Santiago Vázquez released a report citing ASA problems and possible solutions, but has been unable to muster the coordination needed to ward it off. The ASA has gone through four executive directors since then.

The current governing board consists of five appointees, who change with each governor, and two officials elected by the Department of Consumer Affairs. Members' terms run from two to four years, guaranteeing the same upheaval seen throughout the government after the incumbent party loses its hold on power.

One of the backers of the concept of having a separate political entity guard water supplies is Juan Mayol, an engineer well-versed in water agency woes: Mayol currently serves as president of ASA's Board of Governors, and held the post of ASA executive director for four years beginning in 1977.

He has suggested creating a board whose members are either appointed by the governor for seven-year terms or elected by the people for eight-year terms.

"It's the only way you can get continuation," said Mayol in a telephone conversation Wednesday.

Choosing board members through an islandwide election would open the whole process to more public input, an airing-out that could bring forth creative ideas. (And wouldn't it be great if candidates would avoid aligning themselves with a political party? Red and blue and green fade from a mind that only wants to see clear water spouting from the faucet.)

Water commissions are a common feature of stateside municipal governments.

Although appointed by Gov. Rosselló, Mayol said he has not yet broached this idea with the governor. ASA Executive Director Emilio Colón declined to comment on the idea when asked Wednesday about its feasibility.

A similar — or even the same — board should govern the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority, Mayol notes, and he has a name in mind for such an umbrella



MELANIE LENART
EcoLogic

body: The Essential Services Commission.

That name sums it up about right. And it also explains why the two agencies deserve such special treatment: Water and electricity bind together the fabric of our modern society, holding together industry, commerce, communications, sanitation, tourism and other ventures that make our world go around.

These two agencies have an incredible impact on our natural environment as well, with the overall purity of the island directly dependent upon decisions made with visions of generating more power and/or water.

Should the ASA focus on extracting more resources, or conserving what it has? Should PREPA spend its energy pursuing fossil fuels or renewable energy?

A governing board elected by the people, and given real decision-making power rather than a rubber-stamping role, might come up with answers very different from the ones being pursued by agency directors. Or it might provide an electoral mandate to current policies. Either way, it would be a higher form of democracy than what we have now.

A combination governing board would also be able to consider overlap: energy conservation for ASA, water supplies from PREPA operations.

Regarding energy conservation, an analysis presented at an October conference by Henry M. Marrero of Environmental Operations Inc., found a 10 percent savings in electrical power could be "easily achievable" by making ASA more energy efficient.

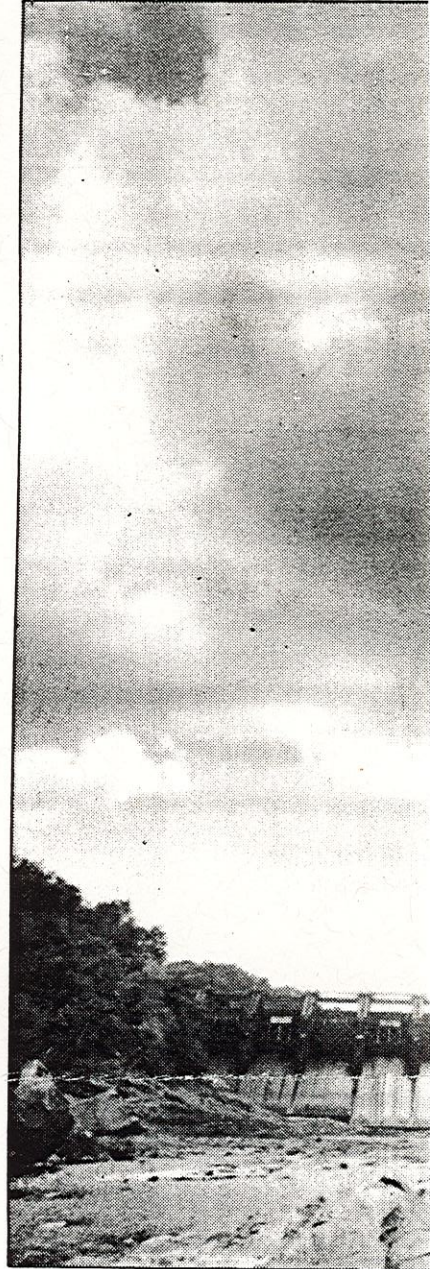
As far as water supplies go, plans for a natural gas plant in Guayanilla include providing 4 million gallons of drinking water daily by using excess steam to desalinate ocean water.

Incidentally, about 4 million gallons is all that would be gained from the Río Mameyes at this point, given the flow measured by scientists Wednesday. Hearings have been held this week and will continue June 6 on whether the ASA should be permitted to tap the Mameyes, the island's only remaining pristine river.

If Puerto Rico pursues its plan to convert more PREPA plants into natural gas, perhaps the cogeneration of steam will provide more desalinated ocean water to help meet island needs. This source, along the planned expanded use of the Río Grande in Manatí and the Río Grande in Arecibo, could make it unnecessary to spoil the recreational Mameyes, which meets the ocean not far from the Luquillo public beach.

Here are some other ideas to consider:

■ Find out what proportion of the



Rain clouds hold the promise of Trujillo Alto, which provides much coupled with ongoing agency rationing — and some hope for

people actually drink the water, without filtering or boiling it first. Almost everyone I know buys their drinking water or has installed their own water filter. If this proportion holds true in the general population, the ASA might be wasting millions of dollars by treating the some 400 million gallons it normally pipes out daily around the island.

Would it be cheaper to provide one faucet filter per family than to maintain the ASA equipment and buy the chemicals that supposedly purify all water as if for human consumption? Or maybe the government could make drinking water available for pick-up from centralized locations.

Treating only the water destined for drinking also would lower the quantity of chemicals — including chlorine, which can form cancer-causing compounds — that we are daily releasing back into island streams and coastal waters. This idea would need further study, but it might be worth considering.

■ Conservation efforts, of course, could resolve much of the shortage during normal times for an agency that "loses" from a third to half the water it treats. Colón deserves kudos for

VIEWPOINT

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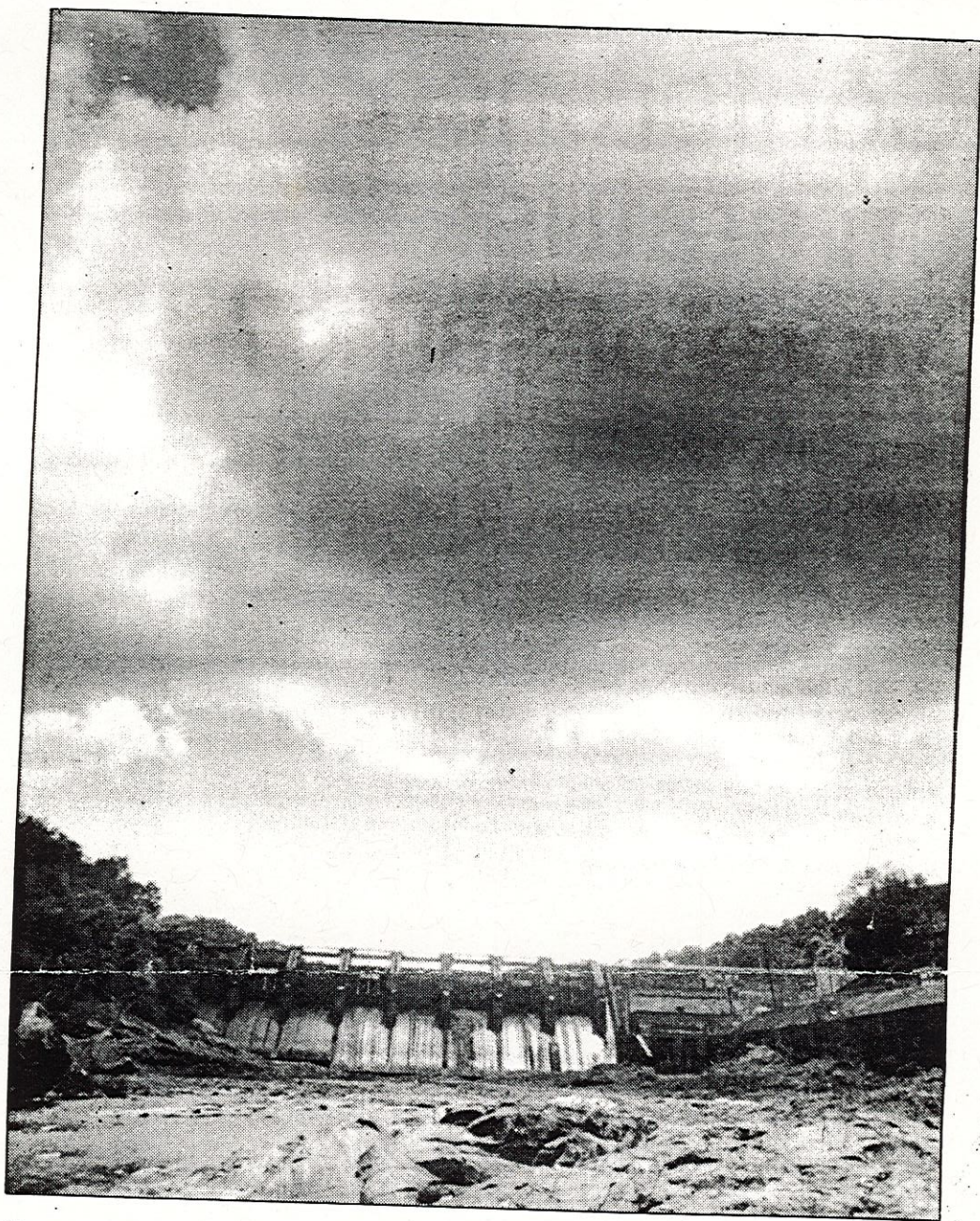
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STAR photo by Farah Rivera
Rain clouds hold the promise of future replenishment for the Carraízo Dam in Trujillo Alto, which provides much of San Juan's water. But drought conditions coupled with ongoing agency problems have inspired widespread water rationing — and some hope for long-term solutions.

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contracting for water pipe repairs, as announced Thursday.

■ Dredging Carraízo Lake, which Colón said has lost about 65 percent of storage capacity to invading sediment since the dam was constructed, is an obvious potential solution. The reservoir supplies the largest portion of water to San Juan. However, dredging has its problems besides cost, including where to get water during the dredging operation and where to put the sediment once it is removed.

A team including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Environmental Protection Agency is working with commonwealth officials to come up with the answers, which may be revealed next week, said José Rivera of the EPA Caribbean office's water management division.

Keeping long-term solutions in mind may be difficult when all we really want is to have a source of water within easy reach. But a focus on the short-term, combined with a drought that can be expected to occur every decade or two, is what got us into this mess. We need a visionary approach, and an appreciation for water's real value, to get us out of it.