FAREWELL TO A WATER RESOURCES LEGEND

B.L. Harris retires after more than 10 years with the Texas Water Resources Institute
After 10 years with the Texas Water Resources Institute (TWRI), Dr. B.L. Harris is retiring to spend more time traveling with his wife, seeing their family (mainly the grandkids), working in the yard, and seeking new opportunities to make every drop count.

Harris, a native Texan and soil scientist, joined TWRI in 2001, bringing with him 27 years of experience in soil science, agriculture, and natural resources with the Texas Agricultural Extension Service (now the Texas AgriLife Extension Service) and Texas Agricultural Experiment Station (now Texas AgriLife Research). Harris earned a bachelor's degree in agronomy and a master's degree in soil science from Texas Tech University, and a doctorate in soil mineralogy from The Oregon State University. He joined the faculty of The Texas A&M University System in 1974 from the faculty at Oregon State.

“I have known Dr. Harris since my original date of employment in January 1979; he was project leader for the soils group in my department at that time, and I was in the crops group,” said Dr. Travis Miller, professor, Extension program leader, and associate head for the Department of Soil and Crop Sciences. “I have known Dr. Harris as an Extension project leader, Extension soils specialist, Texas Agricultural Extension Service associate director for Ag and Natural Resources, associate director of TWRI, director of TWRI, friend, and confidant.”

Since 2001, Harris has provided management and leadership for the institute, serving as associate director from 2001–2009 with Director Dr. Allan Jones and acting director from 2009–2011. In addition, he has been project director for the Rio Grande Basin Initiative for the 10 years of the project, and an integral part in numerous other water quality and conservation projects.

“Bill developed a massive network of state and federal leaders along with commodity groups and water-related organizations, which positioned TWRI as a go-to place related to addressing water issues,” said Dr. Ron Lacewell, assistant vice chancellor for Federal Relations, associate director of Texas AgriLife Research, and professor in the Department of Agricultural Economics.

“With similar interests related to agriculture, we began to work jointly on projects reaching all the way back to the 1970s,” Lacewell said. “Bill had the science and relationships across Texas to bring to the economic models and evaluations, making for a strong program.”

Through these networks, Harris and Lacewell put together program ideas addressing many of Texas’ most critical water issues and presented these to funding agencies and legislative staff to try to bring new funds and projects to TWRI. Once those projects were received, management, reporting, and accomplishments and accountability were equally important to him.

“His tenure at TWRI has resulted in huge accomplishments: Rio Grande Basin, Arroyo Colorado, Seco Creek, Seymour and Ogallala aquifers, Buck Creek, Fort Hood, Dairy Composting in North Central Texas, and many others,” Miller said. “Not only have these huge projects made measurable impacts on water and environmental quality in many areas of the state, but he has developed highly competent and competitive teams that will continue to expand on this legacy. Bill has made an exceptional impact on TWRI and the water programs in Texas and the United States.”

From developing state and federal initiatives to providing input on strategic planning, Harris has positioned priority water issues within the focus of state and federal agencies. He has also served as the liaison with other units of the Texas A&M System and with other universities and agencies across Texas and the nation.

From 2001 to 2011, under Harris’ direction, TWRI developed and submitted 371 individual proposals for water projects, most with TWRI as lead and some that TWRI facilitated. Of those submitted proposals, 232 were funded, amounting to $77 million. In conjunction with those proposals, TWRI funded about 175 faculty members per year in 15 different Texas A&M System departments and in 16 universities in Texas and four other states. During the same time period, TWRI also provided about $500,000 in scholarship support to almost 250 students throughout the state who were studying water resources-related fields. At any point in Harris’
time, TWRI administered more than 90 active projects focused on timely responses, outcomes, and accomplishments.

Former TWRI director Jones, now associate director and professor at the Texas AgriLife Research and Extension Center at Dallas, said, “Bill has been responsible for much of what went on with TWRI in the past 10 years. To a large degree, he stayed under the radar by not wanting credit, but the numbers speak for themselves in terms of funding. He deserves a lion’s share of the credit for any and all of those accomplishments.

“And, in spite of all the efforts of Harris and Lacewell to support their Texas Tech alma mater, we were able to resist giving too much money to Texas Tech,” Jones said in jest. “They are both distinguished alumni of Texas Tech and have official red and black ribbons to put around their necks.”

He added that Harris’ success in bringing in more than $77 million in grants and contracts can be “blamed” for creating a lot of work for other people within TWRI and the university. Those who have received these “opportunities” from Harris know all too well his expectation to deliver more than promised, yet this is what makes his programs so successful.

Harris was also integral in tying TWRI with the Texas AgriLife Extension Service.

“Prior to Bill, TWRI had fewer connections with Extension,” Jones said. “However, his past Extension background and contacts allowed us to greatly improve that relationship, and now we go through AgriLife Extension for outreach, demonstration, and dissemination projects.”

Harris was instrumental in broadening the relationship with Texas A&M’s Zachry Department of Civil Engineering as well. “Bill’s efforts to bring Dr. Ralph Wurbs to TWRI as a part-time associate director created opportunities for AgriLife to work more closely with civil engineering and its excellent hydrologists and environmental engineering faculty,” Jones said.

Harris not only worked with faculty within the A&M System, but served on committees for numerous graduate students as well. He has also helped many new, young faculty to get established within the university through project opportunities.

“Dr. Harris has served on student graduate committees from the beginning of our relationship, bringing his unique perspective to the analysis,” Lacewell said. “Although we developed strong respect for the contribution of each, and certainly there was an improved product by working together, it was always an unknown what off-the-wall question he might throw at students in orals, making them think beyond themselves. I view this as a major contribution in the growth of students.”

Harris’ numerous accomplishments have also led to several awards recognizing his efforts and impacts. He received the Epsilon Sigma Phi Retiree Service Award in 2007, the Texas Tech University Distinguished Alumnus Award in 2003, the Extension Administration ANR Program Leadership Contributions Award, the Associate Department Heads and Extension Program Leaders Leadership Award, the Extension Specialists Association Distinguished Service Award, and the Texas Agricultural Lifetime Leadership Award for Assistance.

“Bill has also played a big part in the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality’s Texas Environmental Excellence Awards,” Jones said. “He was responsible for helping develop the proposals for several TWRI projects, which then led to these projects being finalists and/or winning the prestigious award. These awards brought further recognition to AgriLife projects and accomplishments as well as to the funding agencies.”

TWRI project participants received Texas Environmental Excellence Awards in 2006 as winner for the Fort Hood federal initiative project, in 2007 as finalist and 2008 as winner for the Rio Grande Basin Initiative federal initiative, in 2009 as winner for the Rainwater Harvesting Team Task Force, and in 2011 as finalist for the Arroyo Colorado Watershed Partnership.

Through all of his efforts, Harris is recognized as someone who can get the job done.

“He can cut through the undergrowth to identify the critical problems, he is on a first-name basis with those that can do something about it, and he has an uncanny ability to find funding sources to put money into the hands of teams to get the work done,” Miller said. “In short, he has blazed the trail for practical, applied projects with direct impact on our natural resources and upon our stakeholders. Generations of Texans will benefit due to his leadership.”

The words of the song “What I Like about Texas” by Gary P. Nunn may describe Harris’ dedication and vast coverage of the state best:

You ask me what I like about Texas.
I tell you it’s the wide open spaces!
It’s everything between the Sabine and the Rio Grande.
It’s the Llano Estacado,
It’s the Brazos and the Colorado;
It’s the spirit of the people who share this land!
During his retirement “free-time,” Dr. B.L. Harris will continue being a good steward of water by using his harvested rainwater for irrigating his landscape and garden. Photos by Danielle Kalisek, Texas Water Resources Institute. Illustration by Mary-Margaret Shread, AgriLife Communications.

Besides developing proposal ideas and projects, Jones credits Harris with creating the institute’s communications team.

“The whole TWRI Communications Team as it is today—Kathy Wythe, Danielle Kalisek, Courtney Smith, Leslie Lee, and Melanie Orth—was put in place by Bill,” Jones said. “He saw the need to better communicate our project outcomes and accomplishments, and therefore continued to develop this team throughout the years as TWRI grew, to disseminate our results to wider audiences. He also worked with the team to develop the concept of this magazine, txH₂O, and made sure it stayed up and running and the communications kept flowing. I still know nothing about how he and the communications team does all of that!”

Now that Harris is retiring, Jones feels sure that his legacy will continue.

He adds, jokingly, “We’re sure that after retiring twice, if he comes back for a third stint, he will convince the federal government to divert the Mississippi River to refill the Ogallala Aquifer.”

While Harris is dedicated to water resources, he knows how to take some time to relax as well.

“The professional side of Bill Harris is impressive, and his contributions will endure,” Lacewell said. “But there is another side that is equally impressive. With Janie, his better half, they have a wonderful extended family with close ties to the community and the church.”

He said in the 1970s, soccer was first introduced to Bryan. As it turns out, two young Harris boys and one young Lacewell boy were on that team. So for the first year of the formal soccer league, Harris and Lacewell were coaches of a team, which then extended over many years.

“Bill, as a coach, was balanced and treated all the kids with respect, allowing everyone to play,” Lacewell said. “Winning was the goal, but a greater goal was for the kids to have fun, learn about fair play, and how to follow rules.

“I consider Bill as a dear friend that began early in our careers,” Lacewell said. “It is far more than the professional relationship but one of respect and trust—a valuable attribute to cherish forever.”

His staff at TWRI is very thankful for the many “opportunities” Harris has provided for them, making the institute and each person individually successful. His extensive knowledge, kindness, and respect for his employees and others have been greatly appreciated, and TWRI looks forward to continuing to build upon the programs Harris began.