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**Group has support in river fight**

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A San Marcos environmentalist group's plan to set aside Guadalupe River water for the fish and wildlife in and along the river and its bays was endorsed Wednesday by a prominent Victoria ranching family.

"The (O'Connor) family is pleased to add its name to a growing list of those who support the San Marcos River Foundation in its efforts to ensure that our bays are healthy and our rivers are flowing," said Bill Jones, a spokesman for D.M. O'Connor Ranches.

Representatives of the National Wildlife Federation and the Coastal Conservation Association Texas also endorsed the SMRF plan during Wednesday's appearance by Dianne Wassenich, executive director of the San Marcos River Foundation, at One O'Connor Plaza.

O'Connor Ranches sponsored the event.

Wassenich, who spoke before a crowd of about 30, explained that the non-profit SMRF filed an application with the state in 2000 seeking about 1 million acre-feet of river water each year to be dedicated to the Guadalupe River, to its tributary, the San Marcos River, and to the San Antonio Bay system beyond the mouth of the Guadalupe.

One acre-foot equals 325,851 gallons. That's enough to cover an acre of land with 1 foot of water.

SMRF asked for the water right permit - the first of its kind ever filed - because of its concerns that so much water was being allocated by the state to cities, industries, river authorities and others that there might soon be little left for the bays and estuaries.

The permit application will come before the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality on March 19 in Austin. Court-like hearings are expected to be held before the permit is issued or denied.

"We believe that the Guadalupe River is in danger," said Jones in his endorsement of the SMRF permit. "And we believe that San Antonio Bay is in danger as well if we do not guarantee fresh water inflows into that life-giving system. That's what the San Marcos River Foundation is all about and that's why we support them."

Wassenich said that setting aside water for the river and its bays is vital to the economy of Victoria and the area.

"I don't think I have to tell you how important to the economy tourism - and the wildlife that tourism is based on - is. Fishing, seafood harvesting, birding, all of those things that the rural and coastal economy depend on, are absolutely based on adequate flows in rivers and bays."

She said rivers without adequate flows can experience serious water quality problems.

"If you don't have adequate flow, then your (sewer plant) effluent will bring your water quality down to the point where the river cannot support life," she said. "Or you'll have to upgrade the way you treat your effluent so much that the costs can really hurt small towns and the people who pay the utility bills."

Additionally, free-flowing rivers can help recharge the underground aquifers over which they run, she said.

"So everybody who has wells - small towns, ranchers, farmers - has a stake in seeing the water flow being adequate to support human and wildlife needs - and all of the well and drinking water needs."

Wassenich pointed out that SMRF, if it wins its water right, will donate the right to a state fund dedicated to providing flows to rivers and bays.

"We will not be managing or controlling that water right. We will receive no money for the water," said Wassenich. "This water will never be consumed. We've taken legal steps to make sure that this water stays in the river."

Jim Blackburn of Houston, an environmental attorney working with O'Connor Ranches, said the SMRF permit would have no negative effect on the ability of others to secure future water rights in the Victoria area.

"There are more than ample water rights in the Guadalupe River system right now that are not used," said Blackburn.

For example, he said, water rights held by the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority in the Guadalupe delta area that are being earmarked for use by San Antonio could be set aside and preserved for the Victoria region.

Also endorsing the SMRF permit application was Luke Giles of Houston, assistant director of Coastal Conservation Association Texas, a non-profit marine life conservation organization of sport fishing enthusiasts.

"With 43,000 members in the state, many of who fish and enjoy the San Antonio Bay system, the importance of fresh water inflows is tremendous," Giles said.

He said crabs, finfish, shrimp and countless other aquatic species rely on adequate freshwater inflows for their survival. The inflows are also vital to shrimpers, oystermen, recreational fishermen and the businesses that depend on commercial and sports fishermen.

"Without proper inflows, there will be nothing left to protect, so the San Marcos River Foundation application is vitally important," Giles said.

Myron Hess of Austin, an attorney with the National Wildlife Federation, an organization dedicated to wildlife preservation, said fish and wildlife are increasingly important economically to rural and coastal areas of the state.

"As we continue through our existing permits to take more and more water out of our rivers and away from our bays, we are basically overwhelming (fish and wildlife)," he said. "We are now running the risk of causing a catastrophic loss of those incredibly important resources."

He said if action isn't taken, Texas could be faced with billion-dollar restoration projects to resurrect the bay.

One of the best ways to protect the bay, he said, would be for the state to approve the SMRF permit.

"It would guarantee that we would get a certain amount of flow down to those bays and will continue to deliver it to keep them productive and healthy."

Wednesday's meeting wasn't the first venture into water politics by D.M. O'Connor Ranches.

Last year, the O'Connors came out in opposition to the Lower Guadalupe Water Supply Project, a \$600 million project that would move underground water and Guadalupe River water from the Victoria region to San Antonio.

D.M. O'Connor Ranches is owned by descendants of Dennis Martin O'Connor of the pioneering O'Connor ranching family, whose influence has grown to include oil and gas, banking and other interests.

It includes ranches owned by the following descendants: Kathryn O'Connor Counts and Ralph R. Gilster III of Victoria and Austin; Louise O'Connor of Victoria and Austin; D.H. Braman Jr. of Refugio; Ann Williams Harithas of Houston; and Michael and Steven Anderson of Refugio and Dallas.