

Water needs for man and nature need to be balanced

Ruling by Texas Legislature shoots down private organization's attempts at conservation

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The Texas Legislature recently rejected the notion of private organizations buying river water to set aside for conservation, at least until after a commission studies how best to balance the water needs of man and nature.

Some people fear that Texas rivers could be sucked dry before resolution comes at the end of next year. Unfortunately, this is not that far fetched because lawmakers did not impose the same water-rights moratorium on municipalities, agriculture and industry. Attempts already have been made to purchase much of the remaining available water in parts the state by the City of Houston and others.

This decision is unfair at best, and possibly environmentally irresponsible.

If you don't think this could affect you, then consider what a healthy bay system means to you personally and to our community at large. Without sufficient freshwater inflows, fishing as we know it is at risk.

This legislative decision represents retroactive lawmaking based on the fact that the change was proposed specifically to block permit applications that existed when water rights would have been available to anyone willing to pay. They changed the rules.

The organizations that applied for water-rights permits were working within the system when, collectively, they applied for some 12 million acre feet of water from various rivers. Members within these groups were attempting, in part, to guarantee the flow of lifeblood into their respective estuaries as God intended and nature requires. Recreational flow also was part of their motivation, but this does not diminish their conservation goals.

And while they may have fallen short of this goal, they made a strong point that state water policies favor cities and businesses to the possible detriment of bays and estuaries. This is a tradition that should be broken. A commission is being formed to study these issues and attempt to balance the needs of a growing metropolitan population against those of coastal communities, coastal fisheries and estuaries.

Public meetings will convene and I'll post a schedule as soon as it's available.

The governor, lieutenant governor and speaker of the Texas House will decide who sits on this 15-member commission. Members will represent river authorities, environmental groups including the Coastal Conservation Association (CCA), elected officials and related state agencies such as Texas Parks & Wildlife and the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

You might recall my praising the San Marcos River Foundation in a previous column for its attempt to buy 1.115 million acre feet of water to help keep rafting afloat along and that river system alive, along with the estuaries it feeds. This amount was not arbitrary. It's the amount biologists determined is necessary to maintain the health of that particular river and estuary system.

The SMRF application was among the ones dismissed. The other applications for water permits were filed by the Caddo Lake Institute, the Galveston Bay Conservation and Preservation Association, the Galveston Bay Foundation and the Matagorda Bay Foundation. These efforts mostly represent noble and novel attempts to preserve coastal wetlands, bays, plants, animals and humans that depend on them.

Historically water rights are issued only to developers, businesses, farmers and thirsty communities, which want to share in a supply diminished by an increasing number of manmade reservoirs and pipelines siphoning our rivers and aquifers. And more are proposed.

Nobody knows how much stress a particular bay system can take before it collapses or before it is irreparably altered, but we've seen it happen in other countries. It seems many Texans are too willing to test our bays to the brink of peril. The trouble is, recovery from this point is not assured.

Those who would gamble with our natural resources believe that man's needs for tap water are in competition with nature's needs. I reject this notion. These needs are one in the same and should never be considered mutually exclusive.

The real fight pits wasteful practices against reasonable conservation. Desalinization plants could provide some relief and I hope they do.

But meanwhile, it's ludicrous to think that river water flowing into the bays is wasted. If you want to witness waste, then look no farther than your St. Augustine lawn, landscapes and gardens with non-native plants, running faucets while brushing teeth, shaving or any of the other choices we make to spill more than we should.

Somehow, the burden of proof has fallen on the champions of nature to prove that estuaries need freshwater rather than on those who might destroy it to prove they do not.

Every river in the world flows into the sea. What more proof do we need?

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