

Water planning group asked to focus on Brazos River ecology

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By J.B. SMITH Tribune-Herald staff writer

As a regional planning group sets out to solve water shortages in the Brazos River basin, environmentalists are asking the group to pay attention to the river's ecological health.

The Brazos G Regional Water Planning Group, which met Wednesday in Waco, will develop strategies this summer to meet water needs in a broad swath of Texas from Navasota (south of Bryan-College Station) to Kent County near Lubbock. The plan, which will be used in the the update of the 2002 Texas water plan, could include new reservoirs, river diversions and increased groundwater pumping.

State law requires the group to quantify the effect such projects would have on the flow of the Brazos and its tributaries. But National Wildlife Federation officials urged the group to go a step further than the consulting engineers recommended.

Instead of just looking at how new projects would reduce the current streamflow, the group should also consider what would happen if basin water users consumed all their permitted water, said Susan Kakerda, a regional National Wildlife Federation director. That analysis would show a much greater impact on the environment, since many cities such as Waco only use a fraction of their permitted water.

"We're just saying we need to look at that information," Kakerda said. She offered to let National Wildlife Federation scientists do the analysis.

Brazos G officials voted to authorize the more limited study proposed by HDR Consultants, but said they would be willing to consider the effect of the full-use scenario.

"If a water right is permitted, and if it's fully used, that is an impact to the river and should be taken into consideration," said Mike Morrison, an Abilene assistant city manager who heads the Brazos G group.

Charles Ferguson, a city of Waco employee who represented Waco in the meeting, said he was at first concerned that the environmentalists' proposal would have an impact on cities' existing water rights, but Kakerda said her group isn't suggesting that.

Ferguson said he believes the revised Brazos G water plan will be an improvement on the current plan, which was passed in 2001.

"It's going to be an asset to water planning," he said.

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