

Where the Waters Meet -- Group to ask state to study estuary

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McALLEN — Local water planners are concerned about the ecology and economy associated with the Rio Grande estuary, where freshwater meets the Gulf of Mexico's saltwater.

The Rio Grande Regional Water Planning Group is drafting a regional water plan that will be submitted to the Texas Water Development Board in 2005.

But some members of the group think they are missing some important water planning information — how much freshwater inflow does it take to keep the Rio Grande estuary functioning properly?

The group is concerned that there is no comprehensive information on what caused the estuary to dry up and turn into silt when the Rio Grande ceased flowing into the Gulf of Mexico from 2001 to 2002.

The combination of freshwater and saltwater creates the less saline estuary that many types of marine life, including shrimp and blue crabs, depend on, said Randy Blankinship, Lower Laguna Madre Ecosystem Leader and a non-voting member of the water planning group.

"We're at a place where we can't say how valuable the estuary is," said Mary Lou Campbell, a member of the planning group and of the Valley chapter of the Sierra Club.

The planning group voted Wednesday at a meeting held in the McAllen Chamber of Commerce to write a letter to Texas Parks and Wildlife urging them to study the Rio Grande estuary sooner than is scheduled.

"The need for that planning process was highlighted in 2001 and 2002 when the Rio Grande closed and the river didn't flow to the Gulf anymore," Blankinship said.

The water-planning group ultimately has the influence to make recommendations on the freshwater inflows to the estuary, Blankinship said.

The group's recommendations could be incorporated into the state water plan.

Campbell said she wishes TPWD would study the freshwater inflows of the Rio Grande estuary soon, instead of updating information on Texas estuaries that they have already studied.

"The other studies have been completed and they are fine-tuning those and haven't gotten back to us yet," Campbell said. "That is why we're writing the letter."

The Rio Grande estuary is scheduled to be studied around December 2005, said Cindy Loeffler, water resources branch chief for TPWD.

The Rio Grande Regional Water Planning Group is scheduled to turn in their regional water plan in November 2005, said Ken Jones, executive director of the Lower Rio Grande Development Council.

Loeffler said she has heard the group's concerns in previous meetings on the estuary study schedule.

Writing a letter is a good move for the planning group, she said.

"It's very good for the agencies to get a request like that because it helps us to focus our efforts," Loeffler said.

Studying Texas' major estuaries, such as Corpus Christi Bay, was directed by the Legislature in the mid-1980s, she said.

The Texas Water Development Board and TPWD decided to also study the minor estuaries, including the Rio Grande estuary.

So far the state has completed studies on seven Texas estuaries and written four reports, Loeffler said.

Loeffler said it would be impossible to complete a full study on the Rio Grande estuary in time for their 2005 deadline since earlier studies took a few years.

However, parts of the study could be completed so the group could have at least some of the information to use in planning, she said.

TPWD does not have enough manpower to get the studies completed as quickly as regional water planning groups would like, she said.

"It's always a workload issue," Loeffler said. "There's always plenty of work to do, there's always more than it seems our staff can get done."

Regional water plans are turned into TWDB every five years, Jones said.

It is possible to amend the region's water plan after the deadline, he said.

To this day, no one knows exactly what caused the Rio Grande to stop flowing into the Gulf, water-planning members said at Wednesday's meeting.

Factors, including aquatic weeds, drought and Mexico's lack of compliance with the 1944 binational water treaty, contributed to the Gulf and river's separation, Blankinship said.

"I think we have to go back to studies in order to have background on where we should go," Campbell said. "We are entitled to the results of those studies before we branch out and make some decision that may or may not be in accordance with the studies."

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