

County seeks freshwater protection for bay

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State legislators should work to ensure that Galveston Bay is not shorted the freshwater inflows its ecosystem needs, county leaders requested Monday.

The resolution, which passed unanimously, comes in response to a National Wildlife Federation study that listed Galveston Bay as one of several Texas estuaries threatened by salinity levels over the next 50 years.

The study said the bay could see its populations of shrimp, oysters and fish plummet as the state's growing population made more demands on the San Jacinto and Trinity Rivers.

The resolution was sought by Mark Muhich, president of the local chapter of the Sierra Club.

County officials said it was important for the county to tell other parts of the state of the importance of Galveston Bay.

"Galveston Bay obviously has economic impact, quality of life impact," said County Judge Jim Yarbrough. "It's a very important resource, not only to Galveston County but to the entire area."

Rep. Craig Eiland, who represents southern Galveston County, said he would evaluate the study to see if the legislature should take action on it and, if so, what could be done.

Last week, Eiland said he met with Galveston Bay oystermen about the damage to the fishery caused by high freshwater inflow in this wet year. He said the discussion centered on getting federal disaster relief for the fishery or getting the oystermen breaks on their payments to the state.

State Sen. Kyle Janek, who also represents southern Galveston County, said freshwater inflows were among the many issues facing the state's bays that state lawmakers had to consider.

"The bays are natural resources that must be preserved and protected," he said.

The cities of Houston, Dallas and Fort Worth are among the users of water from Galveston Bay's watershed. About 2.2 million acre feet are removed a year, but an additional 2.7 million acre feet were permitted.

Additional permit requests are pending. The federation's study predicted major ecological problems if communities upstream actually took out all the water for which they held permits, and increased their use of recycled wastewater that would otherwise have been put back in the rivers.

The other estuaries deemed in peril by the report are Sabine Lake, Matagorda, San Antonio and Corpus Christi.