

## Help sought to keep area bay healthy

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At the urging of the National Wildlife Federation, Victoria County commissioners are considering asking the state Legislature to ensure that San Antonio Bay continues to get enough Guadalupe River water to keep it - and the fish and wildlife that inhabit it - healthy.

Susan Kaderka, director of the NWF's Natural Resource Center in Austin, asked the commissioners on Monday to draft a resolution officially making the request of state lawmakers.

"I'm here to ask for your help in protecting San Antonio Bay," Kaderka said.

She said that as the population grows and demand for water increases, cities, river authorities, industries, farmers and others holding state water permits upstream of San Antonio Bay could end up claiming all of the river's water - especially during times of drought.

Under Texas' current water permitting system, she said, there's no guarantee that any water at all will reach San Antonio Bay.

"The way water is managed in Texas in terms of the way our statues are, there's very little recognition and not really enough protection for fish and wildlife," she said. "The whooping crane and other commercially important species will be threatened by these kinds of conditions if something is not done."

Kaderka said the wildlife group's hope is that a way will be found to balance human needs with the need to have a "healthy environment and vibrant fish and wildlife populations for ourselves and for future generations."

She handed out to the commissioners packets which included a summary of the NWF's recently published report, "Bays in Peril," which holds a warning that the Guadalupe River, because of upstream demands, could cease to flow into San Antonio Bay during prolonged dry periods.

"There's not really that much water in the Guadalupe to spare," she said. "The Guadalupe is a river that's got a lot of demands on it - and not a lot of water left."

That's a serious concern for coastal communities whose economies depend on healthy bays and healthy fish and wildlife populations to support commercial and recreational fishing as well as bird watching and other nature-related tourism activities, she said.

"We're now getting to a point where we've got to make provisions for those things ahead of time so that we don't get to a point of no return," Kaderka said. "We don't want the coastal ecosystem to just crash."

That's why the NWF is asking elected officials along the Texas coast to request that the Legislature develop and enact legislation that would protect and guarantee freshwater inflows to the coastal bays.

Resolutions similar to the one being sought from Victoria County commissioners have already been passed by Aransas and Galveston county commissioners and by the Galveston City Council, she said.

The resolutions are fairly simple. They don't tell the Legislature exactly how to go about protecting river flows to bays. Those details are for the lawmakers to work out, said Kaderka.

"What we want is the elected officials in the affected communities to basically be on record saying they want the Legislature to do something," she said.

In the days and weeks ahead, the federation will be making similar presentations to the Bay City City Council, the Palacios City Council, the Calhoun County Commissioners Court, the Rockport City Council, and the Harris County Commissioners Court.

Kaderka said the NWF would also like to make a presentation to Victoria City Council members "if they are open to it."

County Judge Don Pozzi told Kaderka that the commissioners will study the material she provided and will consider adopting the requested resolution at an upcoming meeting.

"Who's not in favor of protecting the estuaries?" he said.

Victoria's Bill Jones, a member of the state's Region L water planning group, spoke in support of the NWF effort, saying state water planners work to ensure that agricultural, municipal and industrial water needs are met. "But not one drop of water has been allocated for environmental interests," he said.

Jones also pointed out that much of remaining unclaimed flow in the Guadalupe River is being sought via permit by the partners in the Lower Guadalupe Water Supply Project, which would supply San Antonio with water from the Victoria area.

He said the permit application shows that those who are in the business of selling water are asking for all or most of the available water and leaving little if any for the bays and estuaries.

Jones also said that Texas Parks and Wildlife recommends that 1.15 million acre feet of inflow is needed to ensure the productivity of San Antonio Bay. "And none of that is allocated right now, at all."

Commissioners on Monday also:

- Heard, during the citizens communication segment of the meeting, a request from O.D. Atwell of Victoria, who asked that commissioners freeze county taxes for those 65 and older, as permitted under a 2003 constitutional amendment that allows taxing entities to freeze property tax increases on the property of those who are disabled or over the age of 65.

Pozzi said the proposal has a downside: other taxpayers have to carry an additional tax burden. Commissioners have asked tax officials to provide figures showing just how much tax revenue would be shifted to other taxpayers. "We continue to study that issue," Pozzi said, adding that city of Victoria officials haven't implemented the tax freeze.

Atwell mentioned gathering signatures on a petition that would require the commissioners to put the question to a vote of the populace.

Residents Floyd Jaster and George Smith also spoke in favor of the tax freeze.

- Approved a \$9,260 expenditure to help fund the expansion of the Placedo Volunteer Fire Department's meeting room, which is also used as a polling place, and to help fund the purchase of much-needed new tires for one of the VFD's fire trucks.
- Appointed Tom Dean Key, Jolene Barrientos, Marty Domke, Patricia Smart and Russell Hodon to the Child Welfare Board and outgoing Sheriff Michael Ratcliff to the Gulf Bend Mental Health Mental Retardation Board.
- Renewed a lease agreement with Citizens Medical Center, which operates a medical clinic in leased space at the county's Dr. Pattie Dodson Public Health Center on Navarro. Citizens will continue to pay \$2,900 a month for 3,670 square feet of space.
- Received a single bid - for \$64,000 from K&T Construction of Victoria - for the construction of a parking lot at the new Victoria City-County Animal Shelter. The new shelter is now being built at the county-owned Victoria Regional Airport. The bid will be reviewed by commissioners and approved or rejected in an upcoming meeting.
- Authorized advertising for bids for fencing for the new Victoria City-County Animal Shelter.
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