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HEADLINE: Environmentalists, Landowners Oppose Texas Dam Plan

BODY:

The state of Texas is running into opposition to its plan to supply water to the Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area by flooding the best remaining bottomland and hardwood areas in the state.

The National Wildlife Federation is organizing local residents in Northeast Texas in a grassroots effort to promote conservation and oppose construction of the \$ 1.7 billion Marvin Nichols Dam and Reservoir on the Sulphur River.

Many residents believe the dam threatens not only their land and livelihoods but also wildlife and wildlife habitat that would be permanently lost once the area was flooded by the reservoir the dam would create.

The project would remove 161 billion gallons of water a year from northeast Texas and send it by pipeline 172 miles to the Dallas/Fort Worth area. If constructed, the dam would flood 72,000 acres of rural Texas, including farms, family businesses, and ranches.

The Marvin Nichols Dam is one of several proposed dams that would create reservoirs in Texas, and it is scheduled for development from 2020 to 2030. It is the most costly project proposed in the state's plan.

"This is a battle over the control of water," said Dave Moldal, National Wildlife Federation regional organizer in Austin. "This is water that Dallas and Fort Worth want to import at the expense of rural Texans.

"In building Marvin Nichols, 30,000 acres of high-quality, rare bottomland hardwood forest and 15,000 acres of mixed post-oak forest will be destroyed," Moldal said. "This bottomland provides essential habitat to a wide variety of game and nongame wildlife species. In addition, any time the natural flow of a river is diverted, it affects fish and wildlife habitat downstream."

A comprehensive report by Texas Parks and Wildlife, a state agency, documents the projected direct impacts to wildlife resources from proposed future reservoir development in Texas. It states that proposed reservoirs impacting wildlife habitats with the highest known quality include the Marvin Nichols Dam.

At a May 30 public hearing conducted by Texas Parks and Wildlife Conservation committee on the impact of future dam development, water expert Dr. Larry McKinney said, "the Marvin Nichols project contains \$ 119 million in mitigation costs, due to its location in the best remaining bottomland and hardwood areas in the state."

Dr. McKinney said in his view, water demands for the next 50 years "do not look as dramatic as the increase in population during that same time period, mainly due to the assumption that agricultural use of water will decline, and the remaining growth and demand will be primarily urban."

But that is exactly the problem from the perspective of Max Shumake of Dekalb, Texas, a landowner and citizen leader who is cooperating with the National Wildlife Federation. "I don't see the need to put property that's used for farming, logging, hunting, and fishing under water just so folks in Dallas can water their lawns," he said.

The largely arid state of Texas has undertaken a lengthy water planning process. Planning groups study population growth, water use, and demand to determine how to best use Texas' limited available fresh water. The plans must consider conservation of water resources and protection of wildlife.

The Marvin Nichols project has been recommended by regional water planning groups and the Texas Water Development Board in its 50-year plan to provide for the municipal water needs of the Dallas Metroplex.

The National Wildlife Federation and other groups say the project is a waste of taxpayer dollars and would be calamitous to migratory birds, native mussels, wild turkey, white-tailed deer, and the forest habitat that wildlife needs to survive.

Already the most dammed state in the nation, Texas has more than 7,000 dams. Conservationists point out that in the Texas city of San Antonio, the per-capita water usage is less than 150 gallons per person per day, but Dallas residents use 235 gallons per person per day.

The National Wildlife Federation contends that the need for the Marvin Nichols Dam would be eliminated if Dallas and other regional communities would lower their water usage rates about 25 percent over the next 50 years, which would still put their usage above the state average.

"Dallas/Fort Worth water users consume far and away more water than any other city in the state of Texas," said Janice Bezanson, executive director of the Texas Committee on Natural Resources, the National Wildlife Federation's state affiliate.

"There are no incentives for citizens to conserve, no organized plan for conservation, or conservation initiatives by the water utilities," Bezanson said.

This summer, the National Wildlife Federation and the Texas Committee on Natural Resources organized citizens' meetings in three small towns in the area of the proposed dam: DeKalb, Mount Pleasant, and Boxelder. After discussing the impacts of the Marvin Nichols Dam, these residents are contacting their elected officials and preparing for public hearings this fall.

From his Austin, Texas, office, Dave Kamp, communications manager for the National Wildlife Federation, said, "There hasn't been a state or local politician who has come out against the dam."

The Shumake family, which owns hundreds of acres of the bottomlands at issue, is worried that their neighbors who depend on the land will be flooded out by the construction of the Marvin Nichols Dam. "Heck, some of these families have been here since the Alamo. Stopping this dam is our Alamo," Max Shumake said.

In October 2001 the Texas Water Development Board will adopt a state plan. In January 2002 the first state water plan will be published.
