

## **Wildlife group lists two proposals as bad water projects**

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By: GREG BOWEN, 11/2/01

Two proposed water-development initiatives in the Victoria area have made the National Wildlife Federation's list of "bad Texas water projects." The federation says a project to pump Lower Colorado River water from the area of Wharton and Matagorda counties to San Antonio could "have a catastrophic effect" on the marine life in Matagorda Bay and could cripple the bay's fishing industry.

A proposal to move groundwater from Refugio County to Corpus Christi would lower the level of the subterranean Gulf Coast Aquifer in Refugio County by 200 feet and could lead to saltwater intrusion and land surface subsidence, the federation says. The National Wildlife Federation describes itself as "the nation's largest member-supported conservation group, uniting individuals, organizations, businesses and government to protect wildlife, wild places and the environment."

The federation recently issued a report titled "Down the Drain," which highlights six proposed Texas water projects the group claims would damage the environment, harm fish and wildlife, hurt rural economies and waste billions of taxpayer dollars. The projects were chosen from among the many water-development proposals listed in the state water plan now being prepared for presentation to the governor and the Legislature.

The two projects on the list in the Victoria area are:

**Gulf Coast Aquifer Withdrawal:** This proposed \$38 million water project would move 9 billion gallons of groundwater each year from Refugio County to Corpus Christi. The federation says the project would withdraw groundwater faster than it could be replaced. Aquifers are replenished largely by rainfall seeping through the soil, the group explained. If water is removed faster than it is replaced, the aquifer will eventually go dry, or its water will become unusable.

The withdrawals from the Gulf Coast Aquifer would lower the aquifer level by 200 feet over 50 years, potentially leading to saltwater intrusion and land surface subsidence, the federation says. A review of the supporting documents in the proposed state water plan describing the project verifies the federation's claim regarding dropping aquifer levels, salt water intrusion and subsidence. But those documents, prepared by water planners with the Coastal Bend water planning group, also say that the billions of gallons of groundwater could be "pumped indefinitely" with "negligible impacts" to the environment - and might even result in increased wetlands

habitat.

According to the Coastal Bend water planning group, the project would involve well fields in western Refugio County. It says the best area for large-scale development is an area generally west of U.S. 77 and 2 to 8 miles north of the Aransas River.

The project would entail two well fields with 28 wells and 37 miles of pipeline that would attach to the Mary Rhodes Memorial Pipeline running from Lake Texana to Corpus Christi. The well fields would have water storage areas and pump stations. The federation says that since the state water plan overestimates Corpus Christi's water use by 25 to 45 percent, this project is unnecessary.

**The Lower Colorado River Pipeline Project:** The project would pump water from the Lower Colorado River into four off-channel storage reservoirs located somewhere in Wharton, Matagorda and Colorado counties.

It would send between 43 and 49 billion gallons of water per year to San Antonio for municipal water uses via a 170-mile pipeline. The project would also provide funding to area rice farmers for water conservation practices and increased groundwater pumping. The cost to taxpayers is estimated at between \$800 million and \$1 billion. "Though San Antonio is expected to bear this cost, new statewide revenue streams for water development are under consideration," the federation's report says.

Because the Colorado feeds into Matagorda Bay, which needs fresh water to maintain its productivity, the project could have a catastrophic effect on the marine life that incubate and mature in its waters, according to the National Wildlife Federation.

The project could restrict freshwater inflows to the bay to a level just above the "subsistence level established for the bay in 1999 by the Lower Colorado River Authority," the group claims.

"This loss of inflows could cripple the more than \$178 million commercial and recreational fishing industry," according to "Down the Drain." The group additionally contends that the project also threatens area wetlands critical to both migratory and resident bird species in an area that has recorded the country's highest count of bird species in winter bird counts.

According to documents accompanying the state water plan and describing the project, Lower Colorado River water planners agree that the off-channel reservoirs would have "impacts on terrestrial and aquatic environments," with the more significant impacts being on "the inflows to and the ecology

of Matagorda Bay."

Freshwater inflows would fall by 12 to 28 percent, causing an increase in salinity that is detrimental to the biological diversity of the bay, the water planners said. However, they noted that the bay already suffers such stress during droughts. "It is not clear how much worse the environmental stress would be," the water planners wrote.

They also stated that the water stored in the reservoirs could be used to reduce high salinity levels "by timely releases of stored water."

#### Other projects

The other projects on the NWF's list are the \$1.7 billion Marvin Nichols 1 Dam and Reservoir on the Sulphur River in Northeast Texas; the \$361 million Little River Dam and Reservoir in Bell County; the Brownsville Weir, an \$81 million dam-like structure in the Rio Grande River that would hold water for area users; and Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer withdrawals in Bastrop, Milam and Lee counties, a \$332 million project to provide groundwater to San Antonio via a 120-mile pipeline.

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