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Crane study not tied to water project

GREG BOWEN

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While the chief partner in the proposed Lower Guadalupe Water Supply Project appears poised to cancel the project, the remaining two partners say they're considering going forward with a multi-million-dollar pair of environmental studies.

One study is investigating the impact the LGWSP - currently a joint endeavor of the San Antonio Water System, the San Antonio River Authority and the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority - would have on the endangered whooping crane.

The second is examining the relationships between freshwater from the Guadalupe River, seawater from the Gulf of Mexico and other factors on the abundance of seafood species, such as shrimp, oysters and crabs in San Antonio Bay - and just how that mix might be affected by the LGWSP. The project would harvest Guadalupe River water from near Tivoli and groundwater from Victoria, Goliad and Refugio counties for export to San Antonio beginning in about 2012.

A taskforce with the chief partner, the San Antonio Water System, last month said the project should be canceled because of cost, environmental risk factors and other reasons. The SAWS board will vote in August on whether to withdraw.

Meanwhile, directors of both GBRA and SARA have instructed their respective staffs to provide them with more information on the overall benefit of the two studies, as well as the studies' specific uses and applications for current and future water management and planning efforts.

"The Whooping Crane Study and the San Antonio Bay Beneficial Inflow Study will each generate important scientific and environmental data and information, with current validity, and will be invaluable to federal, state and local agencies," GBRA general manager Bill West said.

The inflow study, for instance, has been expected to provide information that would play an important role in the development of state-approved environmental flow requirements for the San Antonio Bay ecosystem.

West said information gathered by the studies "will not only supplement older studies and data, but will create a more comprehensive source of scientific information on this dynamic ecosystem."

SARA general manager Greg Rothe said the SARA board "recognizes the importance of these studies and the fact that they represent a significant investment toward increasing the scientific data available, as well as expanding our collective knowledge of factors influencing the environmental health of the San Antonio and Guadalupe rivers and the related bay systems."

Rothe said SARA staff will be bringing a recommendation to its board in August that addresses the benefit of continuing the studies, potential modifications to study scopes and timelines, and possible sources of funding.

The Whooping Crane Study, under the direction of Dr. Douglas Slack of Texas A&M University, "is the most comprehensive study ever conducted on this endangered species," West said. The crane winters at the Aransas Natural Wildlife Refuge adjacent to the San Antonio Bay system.

The study was expected to be completed over a six-year period at a cost of approximately \$2 million.

The San Antonio Bay Beneficial Inflow Study, being conducted by Dr. George Ward from the University of Texas-Austin, is to be completed about 2008 at a cost of approximately \$2 million.