



33, 155, 457

Dallas Morning  
News  
Dallas, TX  
Circ. 584074  
From Page:  
6AA  
10/21/2004  
90365

## Future water demands could hurt coastal fish

### Wildlife federation reports cities' needs hurt balance in bays

By **RANDY LEE LOFTIS**  
Environmental Writer

Texas' future water demands could seriously damage the state's coastal environment if cities and other users don't leave enough fresh water for bays and estuaries, a study released Wednesday concludes.

The right balance of fresh and salt water helps shrimp, shellfish and fish, which depend on the bays to grow up healthy and numerous. Permits issued since 1985 to withdraw water from Texas rivers require protection for downstream uses, including coastal waters.

But most water in Texas was already allocated by then under older permits that don't contain that safeguard, the study by the National Wildlife Federation noted.

Many water consumers don't currently use all the water allowed under those older permits. That could change, however, as water demands rise.

Cities are also looking for ways to reuse treated wastewater that they used to send downstream, taking even more fresh water out of the flows reaching the coast.

That could leave coastal estuaries starved of fresh water, according to the study.

"This presents a terrible picture for our coasts," said Dr. Norman F. Johns, a water resources scientist with the wildlife federation and

chief author of the report.

A combination of rule changes and voluntary steps could help, said Myron Hess, an attorney with the wildlife federation. For example, the state could require protection for downstream uses when an existing permit is sold, he said.

Texas could also preserve part of the currently unpermitted water for environmental needs, he said. And cities and other users could be offered incentives to keep some of their treated wastewater in the rivers, he said.

"We are living with a legacy of older, perpetual permits," Mr. Hess said, ones written in an era when few understood how vital fresh water was to estuaries and how important estuaries were to the state's economy.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality issues surface water use permits and keeps a database of permitted and unpermitted water in the state. Agency officials had not yet reviewed the report's figures or its conclusions, spokesman Glenn Greenwood said.

He noted, however, that several legislative committees are examining the issue, including one special commission specifically considering water flows for the environment. The Legislature convenes in January.

The wildlife federation's report, entitled "Bays and Peril: A Forecast for Freshwater Flows to Texas Estuaries," examined flows into seven coastal waters — Sabine Lake; Galveston, Matagorda, San Antonio, Copano/Aransas and Corpus

Christi bays; and the Upper Laguna Madre.

Using the same computer program that the state environmental commission uses, the study concluded that existing surface water permits in Texas allow the withdrawal of about 7.5 trillion gallons of water a year.

Only about one-quarter of that water is being withdrawn now, according to the wildlife federation's analysis. If all of the permitted water were withdrawn and cities didn't limit their wastewater reuse, all the bays except Copano/Aransas and Upper Laguna Madre would be in danger, the study concluded.

The Dallas-Fort Worth region is in the Trinity River basin, which drains into Galveston Bay, the state's biggest and most biologically productive estuary.

Existing permits allow withdrawal of 1.6 trillion gallons from the bay's watersheds, just over double the current withdrawals, the study found. Withdrawals will go up along with future population growth in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, according to the study and separate findings by North Texas regional water planners.

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### RESOURCES

The wildlife federation's report is available at:

■ [www.texaswatermatters.org](http://www.texaswatermatters.org)

