



33 Texas draining life from its bays

San Antonio
Express-News
San Antonio, TX
Circ. 259192
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10/21/2004
92017

Report warns that the state must act now to protect them.

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The thirst of Texas' growing population soon could cause serious damage to the state's bays and the wildlife and coastal economies they support unless the state acts to protect them, a new report warns.

"The report's findings paint a terrible pic-

ture for our coast," said Norman Johns, an Austin-based scientist with the National Wildlife Federation and the author of the report, *Bays in Peril*.

"Five of Texas' seven major bays received a 'danger' ranking in our study, which means their shrimp, crab, oyster and fish populations could decline dramatically in the future unless protective action is taken," he said in a Wednesday phone conference with reporters.

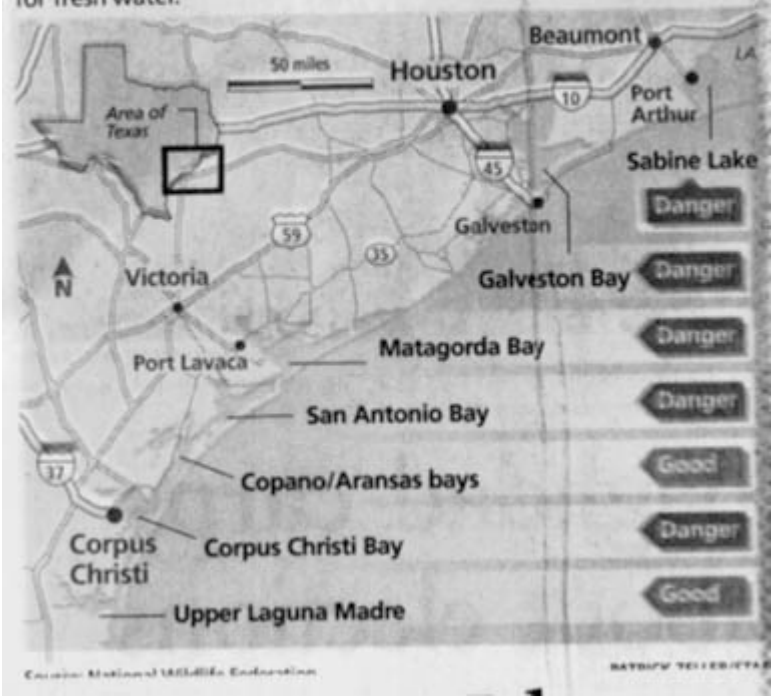
Another species that stands to be affected is one that long has been on the brink of extinc-

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Bays in Peril

A two-year study released Wednesday by the National Wildlife Federation found that five of Texas' seven bays face a bleak future unless the state acts to protect them. The bays face serious damage to fisheries and coastal economies from declining river flows due to increasing demand for fresh water.





Report says 5 bays in gulf are in danger

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tion; the whooping crane makes its winter home on San Antonio Bay, which is among those receiving a danger ranking.

The heart of the looming problem is growing demand for fresh water and the state's century-old water permitting process, the study by the 68-year-old environmental group found.

The National Wildlife Federation has 4 million members.

Texas historically granted perpetual rights to take water from rivers without considering the effects on rivers and bays. The total rights granted now reaches 23 million acre-feet, although no more than 15 million acre-feet of that is used even in a drought year. As demand grows, that could change.

"With this study, we've looked at what those effects are likely to be as more and more of the water authorized under these permits actually gets used," said Myron Hess, legal counsel for the group.

"If nothing is done, the outlook is grim, not just for fish and wildlife but for the tens of thousands of people who depend on the bays to make a living or who use them for recreation."

Hess said the state's water permitting system could be compared to a checking account that's in danger of being overdrawn.

"We have a certain amount of

water, and the permits are the checks we've written on that account," he said. "What we did was sort of tallied up and said, 'What's the balance?' We're saying that if all those checks get cashed, it looks pretty bad. One approach is to say we're going to hope the checks don't get cashed, but we don't think that's a good way to proceed."

The study used computer models developed for the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality to determine how much freshwater would make it to the bays if all existing water permits were fully used. It then compared those results to state estimates of how much freshwater each bay needs.

Sabine Lake, Galveston Bay, Matagorda Bay, Corpus Christi Bay and San Antonio Bay, into which the Guadalupe River flows, are most at risk, according to the study and received danger rankings. The Upper Laguna Madre and the Copano/Aransas bays systems both received "good" rankings.

San Antonio Water System is exploring a water project with the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority that would bring 94,500 acre-feet of water a year to the Alamo City beginning in 2012 from near the mouth of the Guadalupe.

Susan Butler, water resources director for SAWS, said the utility is spending millions of dollars to study the potential envi-

ronmental effects of the proposed project, which would use groundwater to supplement river water in times of drought.

Almost all of the gulf's commercially and recreationally important fish and marine species depend on bays during some part of their life cycle.

An official with the Texas chapter of the Coastal Conservation Association also expressed concern.

"The NWF results underscore our concerns about the maintenance of freshwater inflows that are so important to our coastal fisheries," said Ben Vaughan III, chairman of the group's water subcommittee.

Larry McKinney, director of coastal fisheries for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, called the report a "wake-up call."

"While some people may disagree with their conclusions or their assumptions, the majority of reasonable people will agree that we do have to incorporate these environmental water-flow needs into our water development scenarios," he said.

The group suggests several steps. Chief among them is getting people to be smart about how they use water. Other suggestions include state-offered incentives for people to voluntarily convert their permits to protecting flows into bays.

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