

RIVER DISPUTE RUNS DEEP

Interest still collide over proposal for Neches reservoir

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BYLINE: TONY FREEMANTLE

LUFKIN - If you take time to listen to the river, says Richard Donovan, it will speak for itself.

It gurgles and chatters as it flows through trees that have lost their muddy purchase and crashed across its current. On a clear, moonlit night, it broadcasts the plaintive call of the great horned owl. It embraces the yowls and yips of coyotes hunting on its banks. It echoes with the snort of a startled deer crashing through the hardwoods on its fertile flood plain.

The river doesn't need a retired realtor from Lufkin, an environmentalist who has spent his life discovering the exquisite mysteries of the East Texas woods, to tell you what would happen if it lost its voice. All you need do, he says, is come down here and listen to it tell its eloquent story, and then imagine the loss if it ever went quiet.

But few do.

That is why every morning for nearly a month, Donovan climbed out of his small tent somewhere on the banks of the Neches River, unfolded his aching 65-year-old frame and shoved his canoe into the softly flowing current to continue his journey and his quest to tell the world that a beautiful, wild stretch of river could be lost forever.

For more than half a century, the dam builders have had their eyes on the upper Neches. At river mile 160.4, near the city of Rockland, they want to build a giant concrete and steel wall across the river, backing it up on itself to create a vast sheet of flat water 126,500 acres big that would store billions of gallons of water for the industries and people of Beaumont and Port Arthur, maybe even Houston.

The Rockland Dam was first proposed in 1945. It was finally deauthorized in 1988 after a campaign to kill it was mounted by conservationists. But it refuses to die. Last month, when the state released a draft of its mammoth State Water Plan to satisfy water needs for the next 50 years, the dam at Rockland once again was listed as a possible reservoir.

It probably won't be built anytime soon - not in five years, not in 10, maybe not even in 30. But Donovan, a member of the Texas Committee on Natural Resources, an environmental activist group, believes that it could

eventually happen, and 80 miles of the upper Neches, together with about 100,000 acres of bottomland hardwood forest, the prime habitat and sustenance for hundreds of plants and animal species, will end up under water.

The only way to stop that from happening, Donovan believes, is to get it designated as a scenic river under the federal Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Gaining publicity for that effort is what motivated him on Oct. 22 to launch his 17-foot canoe just below the Lake Palestine dam and head for Beaumont, about 400 miles downriver, near where the Neches flows into Sabine Lake.

"Rockland is in the (state's) plan, and if we don't do something this will all be under water eventually," he said recently, sitting around a fire on a bluff above the river. "I'm trying to draw attention to that. When I get back I hope to get all the people who have an interest to sit down at a table and see where we go from there. If there is no interest, I'm prepared to walk away from it, because then I don't see much hope in it."

Precisely because of the divergent interests involved, water is an intensely emotional issue, says Craig Pedersen, executive administrator for the Texas Water Development Board, the agency charged with making sure the state has a plan to provide enough water to slake its increasing thirst.

Municipalities, environmentalists, industrialists, conservationists, farmers, recreational users, Richard Donovan - all have their own convictions about how that monumental task should be accomplished.

But there is near unanimity on one stark fact: The state's population will nearly double in the next 50 years, from about 21 million today to about 40 million. By then, almost 900 Texas cities will either have to drastically reduce water consumption or find new sources to sustain themselves in a drought.

In 1997 the Legislature, recognizing in part the diverse interests and needs, passed a bill that decentralized the way water planning was done in the state. It authorized the creation of 16 regional planning groups to assess the needs and resources of their particular areas, and demanded that each body include a representative from 11 specific interest groups.

In October, the water development board released for public comment its draft State Water Plan based on reports from the 16 regions. The comment period ended last week, and in January 2002 the plan will be presented to the Legislature.

Initially, it calls for eight new major reservoirs to be added to the state's 214 existing impoundments. Nearly one-third of the groundwater available in the state is not used because of inadequate infrastructure, and the plan says that should be provided. Conservation by agriculture, industry and the general population will also be critical, it says.

All of which, according to the board, will cost \$ 108.6 billion over the 50-year life of the plan.

Not surprisingly, the plan is being strongly criticized by the state's environmental community. On a micro level, people like Donovan are concerned about what the regional plans mean for their own back yards. On a macro level, statewide groups have expressed concern that not enough thought was given during the planning process to the effect dams would have on freshwater inflows into the state's vast estuarine system and to what would happen to aquifers if much more water is siphoned out of them.

Pedersen acknowledges that only Region H, which includes the Houston area, included any analysis of freshwater inflows into Galveston Bay and Trinity Bay. But, he said, the plan was "organic," and by law had to be reviewed every five years so that problems could be corrected.

"We've already come up with rules for the next round of planning, and they will include taking a closer look at environmental issues," Pedersen said. "Environmental flow issues is one area where there can be thoughtful improvement."

According to the National Wildlife Federation, there are others.

Myron Hess, legal counsel for the organization's Austin office, charges that the plan's assessments of future demands for water in the state are "inflated" and create pressure for reservoir projects that are not needed.

One such project is the proposed Marvin Nichols 1 Dam to be built at a cost of \$ 1.7 billion on the Sulphur River in Northeast Texas. The reservoir, he said, will primarily serve the Dallas-Fort Worth area by pumping 161 billion gallons of water per year to the Metroplex through a 172-mile pipeline.

Those two cities, Hess said, use more water per person than any other area in the state and could do without the reservoir simply by cutting consumption by 22 percent over 50 years.

"We have to be more efficient with the water that we use," Hess said. "Much of the water Dallas uses is for lawn watering. We can cut back the expected demands of a region simply by using water more efficiently."

Reservoirs are a special concern, environmentalists charge, because they not only have an effect on the river upstream of the dam but also alter the entire character of the downstream portion. In Texas, where almost all the major rivers flow into bays and estuaries on the Gulf Coast, reservoirs seriously alter the freshwater inflows into those systems.

"All these plans that address the water needs of the state for the next 50 years don't address the water needs of the fish and wildlife in the state for the next 50 years," said Ken Kramer, director of the Lone Star chapter of the Sierra Club. "There was virtually no investigation of the environmental impact of the structural projects planned. A lot of regional plans based their outlook on the premise that their projects can be built, when some projects may not be able to pass environmental muster."

Richard Donovan probably won't live to see his beloved Neches River flooded by the Rockland Dam. The mere thought that it may happen is enough motivation for him to fight to save it for future generations.

He might, however, live to see the threat against it disappear.

The water plan submitted by Region I, which includes the Angelina and Neches river basins, merely recommends that the Legislature designate Rockland as a "unique reservoir site," which essentially means that no one can stop it from being built in the future. But the state water development board declined to place Rockland on its list of recommended unique reservoir sites in part because of "potential environmental conflicts with federally protected river reach."

In short, the board recognized that it may be immune to development if it wins federal recognition as the Upper Neches Scenic River, as Donovan wants. That may be easier said than done.

There is only one other river segment in Texas that is designated Wild and Scenic, a remote section of the Rio Grande west of Big Bend National Park. That might say more about local attitudes to federal intervention in private land issues than it does about the quality of the state's rivers, said Kristen McDonald, associate director of the Wild and Scenic Rivers program at American Rivers, a national watchdog organization.

The section of the Neches between Lake Palestine and B.A. Steinhagen Lake, which Donovan says is one of the last remaining free-flowing sections of river left in the state, has already been included on the National Park Service's Nationwide Rivers Inventory, a listing of more than 3,400 free-flowing river segments in the United States that are believed to possess one or more "outstandingly remarkable natural or cultural values

judged to be of more than local or regional significance."

Much of this section of the river flows through private land, and much of that land is owned by Temple Inland Inc., one of the largest lumber and paper companies in East Texas. Without Temple and the other landholders solidly behind it, Donovan's daughter Gina believes efforts to get scenic designation for the Neches will go nowhere.

"If you don't have their support, there's not much you can do," she said. "Basically they have two choices: They either support designation or they lose thousands of acres of land."

Mike Harbordt, vice president of environmental issues at Temple who also served on the East Texas regional water planning committee, said the company supports the prudent use of water resources and has found "no compelling evidence that the Rockland reservoir is needed or feasible." If Donovan wants to talk about the scenic designation, Harbordt said, "I'm sure those discussions will happen."

Donovan, who worked for Temple when he was younger and who like most people here still refers to the Temple family patriarch as "Mr. Temple," is convinced that if he can come up with a plan for the river that the old man can live with, "he'll be for it."

"I don't know of anything else I can do," Donovan said. "It's the only way we can save this river for the future."

On Friday, under cloudy skies, Donovan arrived in Beaumont, loaded his canoe onto a trailer at Collier's Park Ferry and headed home to Lufkin. Now comes the hard part - bringing people together to finish what he started.