

Fish and Wildlife service announces wildlife refuge in NE Texas

Associated Press, DALLAS - The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Monday that it has approved establishing a new national wildlife refuge in northeast Texas in an area where some wanted to build a reservoir to provide water for the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

The new refuge will conserve more than 25,000 acres along 38 miles of the Neches River, pending the availability of funds to purchase the land, the agency said in a news release.

The area, in Anderson and Cherokee counties, was identified in 1985 as ecologically important. The bottomland hardwoods and associated wetlands are vital for waterfowl such as mallards, dabbling and wood ducks, the agency said.

Additional species that will be protected within the approved project area are the bobcat, river otter and multiple species of fish, reptiles and amphibians, including the threatened American alligator.

"Acquiring the full 25,281 acres may take a long time, but we are excited to begin the process of permanently protecting this ecologically significant habitat," said Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dale Hall.

The move was applauded by environmental groups, including the National Wildlife Federation and Environment Texas.

"The Neches River is home to some of the last and best remnants of bottomland hardwood forest in the state," said Susan Kaderka, center director for the Wildlife Federation's Gulf States Natural Resource Center. "These bottomlands are simply too precious to flood for a water supply reservoir."

The Texas Water Development Board had approved a long-range regional plan in April to build the Fastrill Dam on the Neches River and the Marvin Nichols Dam on the Sulphur River to supply water to the Dallas-Fort Worth area. The approval did not guarantee the construction of the reservoirs.

Dallas spokeswoman Danielle McClelland told The Associated Press that the city has no comment.

"This is a big victory for the Neches River and the forests and wildlife of East Texas," said Environment Texas Advocate Luke Metzger. "This area is one of Texas' true natural treasures and we're relieved Fish and Wildlife listened to science rather than the lobbyists."

Stopping Fastrill is good news for the Texas State Railroad, a steam-powered tourist excursion train operated by the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department, said John Parker of Lufkin, a commissioner for the state agency.

Budget cuts have drastically affected the railroad, which runs between Rusk and Palestine.

"At least the (TSRR) is not going to be submerged beneath a lake for Dallas. I think we will still have a struggle with the railroad, but at least we won't have the struggle of being submerged underwater," Parker said in a story for Tuesday's editions of The Lufkin Daily News. "I am absolutely ecstatic; as we speak I am writing Dale Hall an e-mail with my profound appreciation of his dedication to the cause of wildlife and wild place conservation."

Tom Mallory, general manager of the Upper Neches River Municipal Water Authority, said the Fish and Wildlife Service didn't take into account the demands of public water needs.

"When the shortage occurs, it's too late to do something about," he said in a story in Tuesday's Tyler Morning Telegraph.

Michael Banks, co-chairman of Friends of the Neches River, said the decision was a victory for both Dallas and East Texans.

"This isn't a victory over Dallas," he told the Morning Telegraph. "Now they have a place to come and enjoy the green space. They have had enough water and they didn't need this. Now they're going to have a place to play in the woods."