

Dam plans earn Neches River 'endangered' label

By CHRISTINE S. DIAMOND

Tuesday, April 17, 2007

Ongoing plans to construct another dam along the Neches River earned the East Texas waterway a spot on American Rivers' 2007 top 10 list of most endangered rivers.

In its 22nd year to highlight endangered rivers, American Rivers put its spotlight on Texas legislators and local leaders to protect the river from proposed reservoirs.

"It is important to understand that our 'America's Most Endangered Rivers' report isn't about the most polluted rivers in the country, or the most degraded," said Rebecca R. Wodder, president of American Rivers. "The 10 rivers listed here are rivers at a major crossroads. These rivers face a major decision in the coming year that will dramatically and drastically affect the health of the river and the ability of people to enjoy it."

For the Neches River the decision making time is now, as legislators contend a myriad of bills seeking unique reservoir designation for 19 potential new reservoir sites in Texas, including Fastrill. This designation would prohibit anyone from altering the land to where it could not be used as a reservoir, even if construction is 40 -50 years in the future.

Thirsty populations

As Dallas city planners said the reservoir is needed to quench the thirst of their booming population, state and regional water planners approved plans for Fastrill Reservoir - in spite of vast opposition from East Texans

"Everything is bigger in Texas, including the contempt some lawmakers have for their state's natural assets," Wodder said. "To trade a local economy worth millions and a place treasured by tens of thousands of people for a dam that isn't even remotely necessary is the definition of a bad deal. The Fastrill Folly is a deal where nearly everyone loses."

Dallas would control the proposed East Texas lake, and acquire the necessary acreage for flooding through eminent domain.

For these reasons Rep. Jim McReynolds, D-Lufkin, and Angelina County Judge Wes Suiter on Monday each said they oppose Fastrill Reservoir.

"I'm not wild about Fastrill, and I think I'm reflective of East Texas when I say that," McReynolds said, calling from the House floor in Austin. He added that feedback on legislation involving Fastrill Reservoir was predominantly negative, especially from his East Texas constituents.

Should any reservoir-related bill make it to the floor McReynolds said he would stand up in opposition to

Fastrill, and request an amendment to exclude the reservoir.

Playing nice

Suiter reiterated his stance that water in East Texas should stay in East Texas, relating the the Fastrill issue to the ongoing attack on junior water rights. Even though Dallas carries more weight than East Texas, Suiter said Dallas still "needs to play nice."

"It's bad enough that Dallas is already one of the biggest water-wasters in Texas," says Wodder. "But with the Fastrill Folly, Dallas will also be sluicing millions of dollars of public money into a dam that's not even remotely necessary."

Dallas' forecasted need for more reservoirs could be avoided through conservation practices, according to the National Wildlife Federation which released its own report "Save Water, Save Rivers, Save Money: The Potential of Municipal Water Conservation in Texas" Monday in conjunction with the American Rivers report.

In recent years residents of this North Texas city gained the distinction of using more water per person per day than residents in any other city, except their nearby neighbors of Plano, according to American Rivers.

National Wildlife Federation also noted that Dallas has made efforts to improve conservation in recent years, which Texas Water Development Board validated.

Proposed Fastrill Reservoir overshadows hardwood bottomland habitats identified by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists in the late 1980s as one of the last remaining wetland habitats of its quality in the region.

"The Neches River and its bottomlands form the largest contiguous wildlife corridor in the state," said Gina Donovan, with Texas Committee on Natural Resources. "Thousands of people flock to the Neches every year to paddle, fish, bird-watch, and hunt in the bottomlands. With this senseless project, lawmakers are clearly demonstrating they would rather those people, and the millions of dollars they bring with them, go elsewhere."

The fallout from damming the Neches at Fastrill would be felt downriver through the national forests, hunting leases, the Big Thicket National Preserve, all the way to the estuaries where the Neches River's fresh water dilutes the Gulf of Mexico enough for a multitude of sea life to breed, wildlife biologists have said.

"Dams alter the natural water flow of a river, or stream, down river from the dam which affects normal flood patterns, normal flow of nutrients in the water, normal movements of fish, reptiles and amphibians, and more," explained Nathan Garner, regional wildlife director for Texas Parks and Wildlife.

This could lead to negative consequences for the plants and animals in this watershed, he said.

Dams affect ecosystem

"Dams can have a direct or indirect affect on the entire ecosystem of the watershed," Garner said.

The federal wildlife agency was finalizing its lengthy reports and public hearings for the refuge which would protect the wetlands home to thousands of birds and other species, in spring 2005, when Dallas City Council announced its need for Fastrill Reservoir.

As federal land is immune to eminent domain, its creation as a national refuge would have spared that

section of the river from dams. Land for the refuge would be acquired by voluntary sales or donations.

Although the national wildlife director did establish the National Neches River Wildlife Refuge last summer - accepting the first donated acre a month later, its future is now before a federal judge. Both the city of Dallas and Texas State Water Development Board sued the federal wildlife department for creating the refuge in view of the state's plans to approve a refuge at the location.

"The Neches River, one of the last wild rivers in Texas, will drown behind a new dam if water developers get their way," Wodder said. "The Texas Water Development Board and the city of Dallas are trying to overturn protection for the Neches River National Wildlife Refuge and convert the area into a huge reservoir that would flood a 40-mile stretch of river."

Sen. Robert Nichols, R-Jacksonville, on Monday, offered a third solution.

"In regards to the refuge versus reservoir debate, everyone forgets the third option - do neither," he said. "We must balance Texas' growing water needs with preserving our natural resources."

Seeking to prevent state control of local natural resources through implementation of the refuge, East Texans would ultimately relinquish that same control to a federal agency forever, he said.

"Ideally, Texas can find other means to meet the demand for water, and we can preserve these scenic woods and wetlands without giving ultimate control to the federal government," Nichols said.

Find this article at:

<http://www.news-journal.com/news/content/news/stories/04172007Neches.html>