

New river law puts Victoria in front of the boat, locals says

Legislation aims to protect waters and aquatic life

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Fish are important, too. Texas law now says so.

Recent legislation aims at protecting all Texas waters beginning with the rivers - and the aquatic life there and in the bays and estuaries.

In regulating river flow standards lawmakers also hope to balance human, agricultural and industrial needs.

Victoria sits primed on the banks. This Guadalupe River-dependent city will have a strong voice in statewide conversations between scientists and legislators, area water authorities say.

The law forms environmental flows commissions for every Texas river system. Each commission will include water authorities, cities, environmental groups, businesses and scientists who will analyze the needs of each system.

"It will help our water rights in the future by protecting that environmental balance," said Jerry James, Victoria's director of environmental services. "It'll keep water flowing in the river ... and we have a say in the process."

Once the environmental flows commissions analyze the needs of all river stakeholders the findings will be poured into a future river rights permitting system, James said.

Victoria's present-day rights allow conditional pumping from the Guadalupe each day.

But just last year a state drought forced Victoria to turn its river pumps off and to rely heavily on off-channel reservoirs and deep groundwater. When the river dips, so do the city's rights to it.

This new law, and the commissions it forms, allows Victoria further leverage in pushing for secure future water rights. James said this process could keep the city's junior water rights in tact.

And the law, passed in June, could benefit Victoria in other ways.

In addition to establishing a practical balance between human and environmental needs, river flows regulation could secure the downstream recreational uses that serve as a boon to the regional economy.

"Future economic growth and the ability to attract business will require surface water," said Dale Fowler, president of the Victoria Economic Development Corp. "And I think that just goes to an overall environmental stewardship we all share."

Fowler said the success of neighboring industries, such as sports fishing, can increase local tourism.

"It's all part of our economy," he said. "People who travel to Port O'Connor come through Victoria."

Garrett Engelking, general manager of the county's groundwater district, agrees.

"Bays and estuaries support a host of economic benefits," Engelking said. "You've got the Port of Victoria, shrimpers, oyster harvesting, commercial fishing and recreational activities on the coast and it all impacts Victoria County's economy."

Engelking said this law is a critical, groundbreaking step that puts bays, estuaries and freshwater at the forefront of water policy, a step needed to ensure rivers aren't pumped dry and aquatic life isn't one day decimated.

Of course, water policy is a mix of science and politics, James said.

"But if you take care of the estuaries it means you're taking care of the river that feeds it, and that river is important to Victoria," James said.

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