

Beaumont citizens skeptical of water flow bill

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09/28/2007

The concept of water suppliers and conservationists working together to set environmental flow standards for every major freshwater system in the state seems too far-fetched for many of those who attended Thursday night's forum at the Holiday Inn-Beaumont Plaza.

Still, Texas Senate Bill 3 and Texas House Bill 3, which went into effect on Sept. 1, dictate just that.

The new legislation, described in detail to a full house, was met with skepticism during a question and answer session that followed presentations from the National Wildlife Federation, Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department representatives.

Environmental flows are the amount of water necessary for a river, estuary or other freshwater system to maintain its health and productivity, according to the National Wildlife Federation.

The Sabine and Neches rivers and Sabine Lake are the water systems slated to move forward with this process first.

Some attending the meeting argued the system is too politically driven to work. But Ken Kramer, director of the Lone Star Sierra Club in Austin who has dedicated more than 20 years to the Sierra Club as a volunteer and employee, urged them to keep an open mind.

"We think this is something that will work," he said. "We wouldn't be trying it if we didn't think it would work. I'm getting too old to bat my head against a brick wall."

Others attending the meeting feared the legal standards would stunt economic development or that wildlife concerns would trump human water needs.

"It's not just about critters, it's about people," said Myron Hess, legal counsel for the National Wildlife Federation. "People aren't going to move to a place where people have killed their bays. People need a healthy environment."

One man asked what Louisiana's role would be in the process as that state also utilizes the Sabine River.

"The fish swim on both sides of the river, you know," the man said.

The state will adopt legal standards for each river and estuary based on feedback from a scientific team and a 17-member group of "stakeholders," which under the legislation should be a group with diverse interests, including conservationists and water suppliers.

Stakeholders will be appointed by Nov. 1 by members of the Environmental Flows Advisory Group, which includes state Rep. Mike Hamilton, R-Mauriceville.

Hess reminded the audience that this is not a plan that will please everyone but a compromise.

"It's about consensus," he said. "Yes, in some sense, it is a political system, but this is a real chance for people to get involved. We have a place at the table for all the interests in a way that we've never had before. We need to give this a shot."

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