

## **Water Supplies At Issue As New Project Starts**

Tyler Paper Editorial

Plentiful water supplies are a natural heritage of East Texas so residents might tend to take a "why worry?" attitude when there is talk about meeting future needs.

River systems like the Sabine and Neches long have provided more than adequate supplies of water for this section of the state and people assume they are going to just keep on flowing plenty of the liquid for future needs.

But public apathy on the importance of the area taking action to keep those rivers bringing in enough water for the future could lead to East Texas being shortchanged.

Over the next three years, a new process created by the Texas Legislature will be examining such questions as: How much water do East Texas' rivers need to stay healthy? How much water can be taken out of a river for use in cities, on fields and in factories?

Answers determined in that process could dramatically affect the natural heritage of East Texas, said Myron Hess, manager of Texas Water Programs, National Wildlife Federation.

"Everyone who cares about healthy rivers should get involved with the process or East Texas could end up getting shortchanged," he warned.

Texas population is expected to continue to grow rapidly and those new residents will need water, he explained. Comparatively speaking, East Texas is where the water is and some other parts of the state are looking in this direction for new water supplies.

On Sept. 1, Senate Bill 3 and House Bill 3 took effect, beginning the Environmental Flows Allocation Process. The process begins by creating two new statewide groups. The first is the Flows Allocation Advisory Group whose members are appointed by the governor, lieutenant governor and speaker of the house. The Advisory Group appoints members to the Flows Science Advisory Committee and the Bay/Basin Stockholder Group.

The state will be divided into seven areas with Tyler falling in Area A which includes the Sabine and Neches Rivers and Sabine Lake Bay Area. Stakeholder groups then are to be selected for the areas.

Beginning as soon as November, a group of local stakeholders will be charged with helping provide good answers about how much fresh water it takes to keep Sabine Lake and the rivers that feed it healthy and productive, Hess said.

He said members of the stakeholder group will be named in the near future by a group of legislators and state agency leaders. The group is intended to include a balance of stakeholders from at least 17 interest areas - ranchers, recreational anglers, municipalities, irrigators, industries, environmental groups, public interest organizations, etc.

"In order to ensure that Sabine Lake and area rivers continue to support healthy populations of fish and wildlife, it is essential to have stakeholders who appreciate the economic and ecological importance of East Texas' waterways," Hess declared. "The only way to get strong stakeholders on the ground is to have good candidates asking to participate."

It is not necessary to be a technical expert to participate as a stakeholder, he stressed. The

stakeholder group will establish a team of scientific experts who will develop flow recommendations based solely on the best science available. Stakeholders will consider science team recommendations and overlay additional policy concerns, including competing needs for water, to come up with its own recommendations.

Both sets of recommendations will be presented to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality to be used in making two critically important decisions.

The first is to establish environmental flow which sets the goals for future flows in river systems such as the Sabine and Neches and for inflows into Sabine Lake. Second, TCEQ will decide to what extent those goals should be met by setting aside "available" water - water not already spoken for under existing permits.

In addition to having effective stakeholders serving on this group, individual citizens who are concerned about this issue can get involved by urging local government officials and chambers of commerce to speak up for the health of area rivers and making their voices heard in other ways.

Hess says citizens should learn more about the new Environmental Flows Allocation Process and how they can get involved.

Decisions about the future of the heritage of East Texas will be made by those who find a way to participate and be heard in the process.

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