

Dallas suggests other sites for Neches River wildlife refuge

City wants to move refuge and dam the Neches

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Facing a competing plan for a Neches River area, Dallas is suggesting that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service could find a bigger and better site for a wildlife refuge.

Dallas and the Texas Water Development Board want to build the Fastrill Reservoir on the Neches to help meet the Dallas area's water needs in coming decades.

, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service established a 25,000-acre national wildlife refuge along the upper reaches of the Neches in Anderson and Cherokee counties in East Texas.

Dallas and the water development board sued the federal government in January over the refuge. They say the agency and the U.S. Department of the Interior established it without considering the environmental and economic impact on North Texas.

By naming alternative sites for the refuge, Dallas is trying to point out that it's possible for both projects to happen, said S. Cass Weiland, a lawyer representing the city.

If the Fish and Wildlife Service "had considered these other opportunities that existed out there, we might not be where we are," he said.

Last week, the agency agreed to delay establishing the refuge until the end of April as the lawsuit progresses.

Supporters of the refuge say the area is one of the last remaining bottomland hardwood forests in Texas and an important thoroughfare for migrating ducks.

But a report prepared for the city claims that engineers have identified two other sites downstream which would be better locations for the refuge. The sites are bigger and have 2 1/2 times the acreage of bottomland hardwoods, the report says.

The report also says the bottomland hardwoods at the current site for the proposed refuge are less dense than they were when the site was assessed in 1985.

Opponents of the reservoir dismissed the report.

"This report was commissioned by people who want to build Fastrill Reservoir," said Janice Bezanson of the Texas Conservation Alliance. "I'm extremely skeptical that this site is better ... because the Fish and Wildlife Service has been looking at these sites since the 1980s, and they have chosen the best site."

The reservoir plans have caused a rift between Dallas and people in the Palestine and Rusk areas.

"I can't go out in town, out in public without people saying, 'How's the river going?' " said Michael Banks, head of Friends of the Neches River. "People are very aware that Dallas wants to come take our water and destroy our natural resources."

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