

Texas water meetings could impact Toledo Bend

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- Louisiana's Sabine River Authority officials will be keeping an eye on their neighbors in Texas in the coming weeks as public meetings are scheduled to solicit input on the maintenance of that state's rivers and streams.

What, if anything, is ultimately decided could have an impact in Louisiana, too, since one of those waterways, the Sabine River, is shared by the adjoining states and is the source for Toledo Bend Reservoir. Of primary concern is if any change is made to the required flow of the Sabine River below the reservoir's dam.

"This could impact Toledo Bend by requiring additional releases from the reservoir for downstream environmental conditions," SRA Executive Director Jim Pratt said.

Doing so has the potential of undoing a long-sought agreement finally inked last year between the SRAs in Louisiana and Texas, as well as the utility companies that benefit from the reservoir's hydroelectric power plant, which requires power generation to cease once the 186,000-acre reservoir reaches 168 feet mean sea level.

"Texas Parks and Wildlife has published an initial study that requires more than historical flows in the lower Sabine, and my understanding is they have determined we need to continue to release approximately 1-million acre-feet during the May to September period, which is contrary to the 168 feet minimum we have agreed to," Pratt said.

Meetings Tuesday and Wednesday in Orange, Texas, will explain the technical studies and gather public knowledge and vision for the Sabine River.

The competition for river water to support the state's population and industries is putting pressure on the natural environment, a news release from the Texas Water Development Board states.

The Sabine River is the second largest behind the Brazos River in average volume of water flowing to the coast each year. Industry, cities, irrigators, recreationists and the environment are vying for the nearly 2 trillion gallons of water that flow to the mouth of the Sabine River in an average year.

"This is something that Texas has for all of its streams," Sabine Parish SRA Commissioner Larry Kelly said of the study. "It's a law that it passed over there. No quantity has been determined as far as I know for the Sabine River at this time. I think there have been some suggestions by the Wildlife and Fisheries "» but it's definitely nothing agreed to by the SRAs."

He agrees with Pratt that Louisianans need to pay attention because of the effect any instream flow changes could have on Toledo Bend.

The Sabine River begins in northeast Texas near Greenville and flows south making up the Texas-Louisiana border before flowing into the Gulf of Mexico. Total drainage of the basin is 9,756 square miles. The need for a sub basin study in the lower Sabine River is based upon the potential for substantial water transfers and Federal Energy Regulatory Commission hydropower relicensing at Toledo Bend Reservoir, the Texas Instream Flow Program preliminary study states.

Demand for water in the Texas portion of the Sabine Basin is expected to nearly double between 1990 and 2050, according to the Comprehensive Sabine Watershed Management Plan developed by the SRA of Texas. Droughts, floods and hurricanes also affect Sabine River flows.

The Texas Instream Flow Program will study the lower part of the Sabine River basin, where about 415,000 people live on both sides of the Texas-Louisiana border.

"The public and stakeholders are encouraged to provide local expertise and knowledge to ensure these studies are as good as they can be," said Barney Austin of the Texas Water Development Board, one of three state agencies jointly administering the Texas Instream Flow Program. The other two agencies are the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. The Texas SRA will also assist the agencies with these public meetings.

The environmental flows process will recommend how much water is needed by rivers and bays to support users - human, wildlife and plant life. State-appointed stakeholders will help shape recommendations on flow conditions for seven river basin and bay systems identified in the legislation. A river basin is the geographical area that drains water into the river.

The combined Sabine River, Neches River and Sabine Lake system is the first basin and bay system to hold an "e-flows" stakeholder meeting.

This is not the first time the Sabine River, and thus Toledo Bend, has been eyed for its water supply potential. In 2003, interest was expressed by Texas municipalities in the Dallas region to build a large pipeline to steer water from the upper Sabine River to that water-starved area. Texas entities to the south around Houston also have made no secret of their desire to divert water from the river.

The SRA of Louisiana like its counterparts in Texas has the rights to sell 1 million acre-feet (an acre-foot of water is 1 acre of land covered by 1 foot of water) of annual yield from the reservoir. Toledo Bend holds 4.4 million acre-feet at pool stage, which is 172 feet mean sea level.

Neither comes close to the ceiling. The Texas SRA sells to a smattering of water systems, but Louisiana sells more with customers such as the town of Many, city of Mansfield, DeSoto Waterworks No. 1, International Paper Company, Dolet Hills Power Plant, Ebarb Water System and South Toledo Bend Water System.

Kelly suspects the pipeline project, and thus a larger demand on the reservoir as a water source, will be revisited at some point. "I don't doubt that some day in the future, whether it's in my day or yours, that it will happen. Sooner or later Dallas will need more water than what they can get from their current sources and they'll be looking at it again."

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