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Texas gets serious about potential disappearance of rivers

By Anton Caputo - San Antonio Express-News

If everybody with a legal right to pull water from a Texas river were to do so at the same time, many would simply stop flowing.

This has most famously happened with the Rio Grande, which has failed to make it to the Gulf of Mexico from time to time. But many scientists and water planners worry such situations could become more common in Texas as the state's population booms, intensifying competition for water between cities, agriculture and industry.

That competition could spell death for the river habitats and coastal estuaries that depend on freshwater to support much of the state's fish and wildlife. The possible solution is a mammoth scientific project kicked off by the Legislature last session to determine how much water each of the state's rivers needs to support the wildlife that depends on it. The issue has been termed "environmental flows," but Robert Puente, a former Texas legislator and CEO of the San Antonio Water System, said it translates into a much more basic problem: the potential disappearance of Texas rivers.

"We just couldn't call them rivers if no water flows in them," he said.

Texas is not alone in its struggles to balance environmental water needs with the growing thirst of cities, factories and farms. The issue is emerging all over the nation. It is the impetus for more than 300 experts from across the country and Canada to travel to San Antonio this week for a three-day conference called Flow 2008.

Most states are facing similar problems, but Texas may be ahead of the curve when it comes to solutions, said Larry MacDonnell, former director of the University of Colorado Natural Resources Law Center.

"I think all of us are waiting to see how things work with Texas with great hope," he said.

The statewide project, which was part of Senate Bill 3, kicked off for several of the state's river systems this year. Several more, including the San Antonio River, next year should begin the process, which seeks to pull together all groups, from environmentalists to industry, with an interest in the water debate to hash out who gets what.

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department Director Carter Smith concedes the multiyear process will be complicated and wonkish, but he said the stakes are high for everyone in the state.

"What is at stake is the future of our rivers, from the Neches River to the Nueces to the Rio Grande, and all in between, for future generations," Smith said.

Paul Montagna, ecosystem studies chair at the Hart Research Institute in Corpus Christi, said the state's diverse coastal bays and estuaries and their wildlife also hang in the balance.

A two-year study released in 2004 by the National Wildlife Federation found that the marine populations in five of the state's seven major bays, including Corpus Christi and San Antonio, would be in danger if all existing water rights were exercised. Montagna said real-life examples abound across the globe of how cutting off water to coastal estuaries can have catastrophic effects.

Locally, he pointed to the construction of Choke Canyon Dam in the 1980s, which reduced the flow of the Nueces River to the point where marine populations in Nueces Bay plummeted before local shrimpers sued and persuaded the state to require a minimum flow to protect habitat.

Montagna, who also sits on the scientific advisory panel for the state's environmental flows process, is optimistic about the future of rivers and estuaries in Texas, but he said the scope of the challenge is much bigger than most people know.

"You've got to realize that about 60 percent of all the runoff in the world is captured behind dams," he said. "Man has totally altered the geology and hydrology of our surface in the last 70 or 80 years."

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