

## **Victoria ranchers may oppose GBRA water project**

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GREG BOWEN

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Victoria's powerful O'Connor family and other ranchers are considering organizing opposition to the Lower Guadalupe River Diversions, a proposed \$600 million water-development project designed to supply San Antonio with underground water and river water from the Victoria area.

"Ranchers who have depended for centuries on their groundwater have real concerns," said Bill Jones, a spokesman for O'Connor Brothers Ranches. "They're not only concerned about their water wells but also the long-term effects on the ecology of the region."

Jones is organizing a focus group meeting to be held at One O'Connor Plaza in downtown Victoria at 6 p.m. Thursday.

The purpose of the focus group is to "take an objective look at the project, express concerns and perhaps discuss alternatives," said Jones.

Approximately 50 invitees from the counties that would be affected by the water project will hear presentations from Mark Rose, an Austin water consultant and former director of the Lower Colorado River Authority; from Jim Blackburn, a Houston environmental attorney; and other speakers not yet confirmed as of Friday.

The list of invitees was still being formulated Friday, but Jones, who will be the moderator at the meeting, said the focus group's members aren't going to be "skewed for or against" the Diversions project. "A lot of them really have not formed an opinion one way or the other. What we'll have is a group of people who are just interested in talking openly about an issue that's going to affect all of us, not just people who sell water, but the man on the street and the people in the courthouses and in all walks of life. That's why on our invitation list we made sure we invited an extremely diverse group of folks."

After the presentations, the focus group will spend about an hour in a question-and-answer session, said Jones.

Approximately 30 seats in the 80-capacity communications center on the 5th floor at One O'Connor Plaza will be available to members of the general public, who will be seated after focus group members.

Depending on the direction the focus group decides to take after Thursday's meeting, Jones said, public meetings could be held in Victoria, Refugio, Goliad and DeWitt counties to discuss the impact the Diversions project would have.

"After this initial focus group, we'll probably take this more to the general public," said Jones, a former Victoria TV reporter, Formosa Plastics spokesman and Citizens Medical Center marketing director. The O'Connor Brothers Ranches he now represents are owned by descendants of a pioneering ranching family whose influence has grown to include oil and gas, banking and other interests. The O'Connor family fortune in the mid-'80s was estimated at \$750 million by Forbes magazine.

"We want to make sure that (the Diversions project) is the right thing for all the people in the region, if it indeed happens," Jones said. "There's an interest in preserving water for our region and our futures."

The Lower Guadalupe River Diversions would be built by the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority and two San Antonio water suppliers: the San Antonio River Authority and the San Antonio Water System.

It would take groundwater, which is water from under the ground, from the vicinity of Refugio, Victoria, Goliad and Calhoun counties, mix it with Guadalupe River water taken from near Tivoli, and pump it by the billions of gallons to San Antonio via a 78-inch-diameter pipeline through Goliad, DeWitt, Karnes and Wilson counties.

The project's developers say while the Diversions would drop aquifer levels by "less than about 125 feet" in Refugio County, it would result in more water flowing into bays and estuaries of the Guadalupe Delta.

It would also protect flows from the springs that supply the Guadalupe River, preserve water rights for industry along the Victoria Barge Canal a half-century from now, allow for industrial growth in the Victoria area before then, and provide a revenue source for flood management projects along the Lower Guadalupe, they say.

But Jones said many people are "skeptical because something like this is really unprecedented for this region."

The recent listing of the Guadalupe River on the American Rivers conservation group's list of the ten most endangered rivers in the country gives some credence to concerns, he said.

American Rivers said the Guadalupe and its estuaries are in danger due to GBRA's plan to divert water and sell it to municipal users. Referring to the Diversions project, the rivers group recommended that the area should "make more efficient use of existing water supplies - through municipal conservation, efficient irrigation, drought management, and reallocation of water rights among existing users - before it looks to develop new sources from ecologically valuable surface waters."

Jones expressed skepticism about GBRA's claim that the project will actually increase river flows into San Antonio Bay.

"We really question that premise," he said.

Another point of contention: While the project is planned with a life of just 50 years, Jones said San Antonio would likely have the political muscle to extend that timeframe.

"Once the project's in place, it's hard turning back," he said.

**Greg Bowen is a reporter for The Victoria Advocate. Contact him at 361-580-6519, or by e-mail at [gbowen@vicad.com](mailto:gbowen@vicad.com).**