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Working for a healthy Colorado River

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As part of the state's continuing commitment to healthy water usage, a unique Texas environmental law, established in 2007, was conceived to identify the amount of water necessary for rivers, bays and other freshwater areas to maintain health and productivity.

The law, created by the 80th Texas Legislature, is believed to be one of the most comprehensive in the nation. One of the groups working on these "environmental flows" met last week in Bastrop to talk about water in the Colorado River as it flows into Matagorda Bay and the Gulf of Mexico.

Although the group's moniker is long – the Colorado and Lavaca Rivers and Matagorda and Lavaca Basin and Bay Area Stakeholder Committee – it is only one of 11 such groups that will take input from scientists and stakeholders and work with the state to set legal

standards for environmental flows for each river, bay and estuary system across the state.

Myron Hess, manager for Texas Water Programs for the National Wildlife Foundation, is vice chairman of the group.

“We will provide reports to the Environmental Flows Advisory Group and the TCEQ (Texas Commisson on Environmental Quality),” Hess said. “We are working on the flows for the Colorado, Lavaca and Navidad rivers.”

The committee is in the process of selecting a basin and bay expert science team, comprised of technical experts and scientists with knowledge in riparian habitats, marine biology, hydrology, geology and more. The science team will have one year to study the key aquatic habitats in the rivers and bays and make recommendations on the environmental flows needed to maintain them.

Committee members are a diverse lot, from commercial fisherman and rice farmers to water planners and environmentalists. There are representatives from the electric generation and chemical manufacturing industries, the LCRA, ranching and recreational water users, among others.

The mixture of freshwater flowing into estuaries along the coast is vital for fish, shrimp, oysters, crabs and many species of birds, and it’s the economic engine for a $2 billion recreational and commercial fishing industry.

Leslie Hartman, a Texas Parks and Wildlife Department biologist and Matagorda Bay Ecosystem team leader for the Coastal Fisheries division, knows firsthand how freshwater flows impact wildlife.

“We do sampling for fish, crabs and other aquatic species,” Hartman said. “We have a 30-year database on the health of these ecosystems.”

Hartman was one of several experts from the state at the meeting and she is anxious to get the process moving.

“If we don’t get involved in freshwater issues up front and early on, then we will miss out and the battle is already lost,” Hartman said.

Ronald Gertson, chairman of the Colorado and Lavaca Rivers and Matagorda and Lavaca BBASC and a Wharton County rice farmer is involved in numerous water-related issues and is the chair of the legislative and policy committee for the Region K water planning group.

Rice farming is the largest user of water in the Lower Colorado River Basin and the success of crops is tied to the flow of freshwater in the river. Gertson would like to see more emphasis on the relationship between surface water flowing in the river and groundwater from aquifers that feed the river.

“We know through science there is a relationship,” Gertson said. “We want to encourage the state to recognize the connection, to link the modeling for groundwater and the modeling for river flows.”

The Colorado and Lavaca Rivers and Matagorda and Lavaca BBASC will deal with dwindling water resources as they attempt to balance the requirements for healthy rivers and bays and the water needs of an exploding population.

The next meeting of the Colorado and Lavaca Rivers and Matagorda and Lavaca BBASC will be held on Feb. 24 at 1 p.m. in the meeting room of Aqua Water Supply Corporation at 415 Old Austin Highway in Bastrop.

Information on Environmental Flows is available at the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality Web site at www.tceq.state.tx.us/permitting/water_supply/water_rights/eflows.