



Saving the bay

If our rivers have too little water, Galveston Bay is doomed.

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How much water do rivers require? Specifically, how much water do our area's rivers — the Trinity and the San Jacinto - need? And how much can we pump out of them? Those are hard questions.

But we have to face them as Texas' growing population demands ever more water.

On Wednesday, the commissioners of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality will most likely release at least one set of proposed river regulations for the required public-comment period. Environmentalists think it's a lousy proposal.

The Sierra Club, the National Wildlife Federation and the Galveston Bay Foundation say that the regulations supported by TCEQ staff would, in an average year, allow the Trinity and the San Jacinto to be reduced to trickles, with flows a mere fifth of their historic averages - too low to keep the rivers' plants and animals alive.

In drought years, the flows would sink even lower. Because those rivers feed Galveston Bay, its valuable fisheries, oyster beds and tourist industry would suffer, too.

The bay, an estuary where fresh water and salt water mix, is an astoundingly productive ecosystem - far richer in life than the saltier Gulf on the other side of the island.

In the U.S., Galveston Bay is second only to the Chesapeake Bay in harvests of fish, shrimp and crabs, and it's the most popular recreational fishing spot in Texas.

Galveston Bay tourism generates \$7.5 billion each year.

Without enough water from the rivers, the bay would grow too salty to support much of its marine life.

A National Wildlife Federation study, *Bays in Peril*, predicts that unless Texas takes action to limit demands on its rivers, the threat to Galveston Bay will become critical in the next 50 years.

The time to act is now, before the state grants too many more good-in-perpetuity rights to draw water from our rivers. We urge the TCEQ to release a second proposal for public comment.

Of the scientific experts who studied the Trinity and San Jacinto for the TCEQ, a majority supported a competing recommendation: one that would leave enough water in the rivers and bay to protect their ecosystems.

The Trinity, the San Jacinto and Galveston Bay are worth protecting. Texans need that second choice.