

## Rules needed to protect the bay

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Galveston Bay is a local treasure. In fact, Galveston Bay is the second most productive bay in the United States, producing more oysters than any other single water body in the country and accounting for one-third of Texas' recreational and commercial harvests of seafood that generate a combined \$3 billion annually.

But the bay is more than just a vital fishery. Galveston Bay-related tourism generates an estimated \$7.5 billion in travel dollars per year, and birders flock to our shores from around the world. And to so many, Galveston Bay simply provides beauty and quality of life.

The health of an estuary like Galveston Bay is dependent upon an adequate amount of freshwater flowing into the bay from rivers, streams and bayous. This flow dilutes the seawater and brings in nutrients that fuel the food chain and sediments that help stabilize wetlands. However, with the population of this region expected to double in the next 40 years, demand for water will increase, and there is no guarantee the bay will continue to get the water it needs to maintain this productivity.

If the amount of freshwater flowing down our rivers and streams is reduced too much by human diversions, the bay could become too salty, jeopardizing important habitat for the recreational and commercial species that generate jobs and billions of dollars for our local economy. Oysters are particularly vulnerable since they are decimated in waters of higher salinities.

To respond to this potential loss, the Texas Legislature passed Senate Bill 3 in 2007. The bill called for a team of scientists and stakeholders to work independently to determine how much water is needed for Galveston Bay and the rivers that feed it to remain ecologically sound.

However, in our region, the process has been bogged down by special interests. A group led by water suppliers and providers turned in a recommendation with very low freshwater flow requirements that would need to be met in just a few places and would provide only limited flow to Galveston Bay. This recommendation did not have the backing of the majority of the scientists and appears aimed to do the least possible.

A second group of conservation and recreational users attempted to use the best available science and analyze the specific biological needs of our local bay species in making a flow determination. Their report suggests larger flows are needed to protect the bay.

Unfortunately, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality chose to use the weaker, industry driven, recommendations in making its draft rule. This proposal puts the future of the bay and its economic and quality of life values at great risk. Instead of setting seasonal inflow targets based on natural rainfall patterns, it sets only a marginally enforceable yearly total.

Under this proposal, in theory, one big rain event could satisfy the bay's annual requirement — no

flows would be required the rest of the year. Moreover, this recommendation leaves the bay completely unprotected when protection is most needed — during droughts.

It appears that the TCEQ commissioners will post only the weaker draft standard for public comment Wednesday. However, we urge the TCEQ to allow the public to comment the stronger standard that has been proposed as well.

It is imperative for Galveston Bay that the public have an opportunity to comment on a strong freshwater inflow standard that will protect the bay's health for generations to come.

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