



Photo by Jennifer Reynolds

San Leon residents and officials with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Galveston Bay Foundation empty oyster larvae over newly created beds. Cutting the flow of freshwater into the bay could decimate the oyster population.

TCEQ should do this for Galveston Bay

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There are two recommendations about how much water should be allowed to flow into Galveston Bay from the Trinity and San Jacinto River basins.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, which is charged with getting public comment about proposed "environmental flow standards," should publish both reports.

Before you turn off this discussion as yet another round of endless debate about environmental regulations, consider this: There are no good guys and no bad guys in this story.

Instead, it's a difference of opinion between those who want to pull more water out of the river basins for drinking and watering lawns and those who want more water to flow into Galveston Bay to protect oysters and other wildlife.

This is a complicated discussion. It affects everyone who is interested in Galveston Bay.

The amount of freshwater flowing into a bay affects its viability. Here's one example: If the source of freshwater is turned off, the bay becomes saltier. Some species, such as oysters, suffer.

But as Texas' population has increased, there is a growing demand for water from those rivers. Many

cities have staked out water rights that are not now being fully exercised.

Hence the debate about how much water should be allowed, as a minimum, to flow into the bay to ensure environmental quality.

In 2007, the Legislature approved Senate Bill 3, which set up a process for setting standards for bays across the state. The legislation calls for teams of scientists and stakeholders to review information and try to reach a compromise.

The process appears to be working well, with one exception: Galveston Bay.

Both committees of scientists and stakeholders split.

The majority report, which was endorsed by the environmental commission's staff, recommended a base flow from the Trinity River that was below levels experienced even in dry years. There are other problems with the majority's proposal.

One is the lack of recommendations on specific to certain species that biologist use as indicators in assessing the health of the bay. If the population of oysters declined catastrophically, for example, that fact alone should trigger a discussion about the amount of freshwater getting into the bay.

But, since the environmental commission is meeting Wednesday to consider this matter, let's keep it simple.

The commission should publish both majority and minority reports. It should allow people to see and comment on both points of view.

No one wants to see cities in these river basins run out of water. But no one wants to see Galveston Bay become Galveston Lagoon, either.

Given the seriousness and complexity of this discussion, the best thing the commission could do is let people see — and comment on — all the information.