

## TCEQ commissioners need to take bold step to protect South Texas rivers, bays

### *Victoria Advocate, Guest Column*

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Fish, shrimp, oysters, wildlife, people, and businesses all need water. Striking the right balance in providing that water is not easy. Recently, our region saw an unprecedented example of a diverse group of stakeholders, the Edwards Aquifer Recovery Implementation Program, achieve a reasonable balance for management of the Edwards Aquifer. Continuing this success, another group of stakeholders, on which we serve, recently reached broad agreement on recommendations to protect the water flowing in our rivers and into our bays and estuaries.

A dedicated team of scientists and stakeholders have been working since 2009 using the best available information to develop environmental flow recommendations for the Guadalupe, San Antonio, Mission and Aransas River Basins and their associated bay systems. The stakeholders presented a comprehensive report with flow standards that provide enough water to support fish and wildlife, including the shrimp and oysters that many of us like to eat and the fish we like to catch down at the coast, while also allowing for reasonable water supply development. We also recognized the need for voluntary actions to help offset impacts expected to result from future use of some existing water rights and offered many innovative approaches that provide future certainty in the implementation of new water supply projects and protection of our rivers and bays.

The stakeholder committee did the job assigned by the Texas Legislature. The stakeholder recommendations represent a hard-won compromise among various interests that can help us move beyond the water resource quagmires that have long plagued the region. Most of the stakeholder recommendations were adopted unanimously, although there were a few key ones that were adopted by a 19-3 supermajority vote. Those nineteen votes signified agreement among stakeholders representing a broad spectrum of interest groups: river authority, municipal, industry, agriculture, environmental, recreational, regional water planning, and groundwater conservation districts. Now these stakeholders and the many constituents and entities they represent need the Commissioners of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) to adopt rules establishing environmental flow standards consistent with those recommendations.

Our regional economy and quality of life is greatly affected by the health of our rivers and our bays. We need adequate river flow to preserve water quality, support a variety of fish and wildlife as well as recreational fishing opportunities and maintain commercial fisheries, while also supporting businesses, cities and agriculture. We are more fortunate than some areas of the state, our rivers and bays are healthier than many;

however, South Texas is experiencing a population boom and the stakeholders felt a great responsibility to prevent any further degradation to these important natural resources.

Unfortunately, in moving from the stakeholder recommendations to the proposed rule language, TCEQ staff did not include major aspects of the recommended protections. Many of the stakeholder recommended protections for the San Antonio River and Mission River basins remain, but few protections for the Guadalupe River have been incorporated into the rules. Seasonally-significant flow required to sustain and even improve the health of the bay and estuary systems have also been removed. Fortunately, there is still time to improve these rules during the public rulemaking process at TCEQ, which runs from now until May 14, 2012. The TCEQ Commissioners then will adopt the final rules in August 2012.

We urge the TCEQ Commissioners to honor the full extent of the stakeholder recommendations and send a bold message that the State of Texas acknowledges our collective obligation to provide water supplies and to protect our rivers and bays - and the jobs they support - for future generations of Texans.

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