

Survey backs state protection of waterways over growth

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A large majority of Texans want state leaders to make sure rivers, bays and estuaries get enough water to keep them healthy, even if it means limiting water use for other purposes, according to a poll released this week by the National Wildlife Federation.

"The people of Texas understand that maintaining flowing rivers and healthy bays and estuaries is vital to the state's economic and social well-being," said Susan Kaderka, director of the NWF's Austin office.

"These waterways are the lifeblood of our Texas landscape, and the public expects its leaders to protect them for future generations."

The poll was released before Wednesday's meeting of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, during which the commission is expected to consider an application by the San Marcos River Foundation for 1.3 million acre-feet of water in the San Marcos and Guadalupe rivers.

The foundation wants to leave the water in the rivers to ensure a healthy flow.

The poll showed 73 percent said it was extremely or very important that the state ensures a certain amount of water is kept in the rivers to prevent them from drying up, while 6 percent said it was not very important or not important at all.

Seventy-four percent agreed with the statement that "we need to find a way for people to use less water so we can keep our rivers and streams from going dry," while 20 percent agreed that rivers drying up is "sometimes a necessary price of growth."

Eighty-eight percent agreed that the state should grant a water permit to protect river flows for fish, wildlife and recreation.

The poll, with a margin of error of 3.5 percent, was conducted by the Tarance Group for the NWF between March 11 and 14. Eight hundred registered Texas voters were surveyed.

Diane Wassenich, executive director of the San Marcos River Foundation, said the results of the poll should bolster the group's application for a permit.

"I think the results are exactly reflective of what I've seen as I have been speaking to groups around the state," she said.

"I believe those developing and selling state water are not interested in keeping sufficient water in our rivers to protect them. Many of the rivers have had more water rights allocated than there is water in the rivers."

Bill West, general manager of the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority, said the TCEQ should accede to a request by Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst and not take any action on the river foundation's permit request Wednesday. The GBRA has applied for much of the same water being sought in the application.

West said he too wants to make sure the rivers, bays and estuaries stay healthy, but setting water aside by permit is the wrong way to go about it. He said the TCEQ should wait for the Legislature to address how to ensure adequate streamflows.

The National Wildlife Federation urged the TCEQ to keep to its normal permit process for the river foundation's application, noting that a favorable decision would merely keep the application under active consideration, with any final determination a year or more away.

"The poll demonstrates the need for policy-makers in the state to catch up with the wishes of ordinary Texans to make sure our rivers and bays are protected," said Myron Hess, legal counsel for the NWF.