



Texas Bays and Wildlife Are at Risk

National Wildlife Federation Report Highlights Need for Changes in State Water Policy

AUSTIN –Texas bays and the wildlife and coastal economies they support may suffer serious damage before long unless the state acts to protect them, according to a new National Wildlife Federation (NWF) report entitled *Bays in Peril*. The report concludes a two-year study of how Texas’ growing water demands and its century-old water permitting process threaten freshwater inflows to Texas bays. These inflows from rivers are essential, the report says, if the bays are to continue nourishing abundant populations of fish, shrimp, oysters and birds while contributing billions of dollars to the Texas economy.

“The report’s findings paint a terrible picture for our coast,” said Norman Johns, an NWF water resource scientist and the report’s author. “Five of Texas’ seven major bays received a ‘danger’ ranking in our study, which means their shrimp, crab, oyster and fish populations could decline dramatically in the future unless protective action is taken.”

The Texas chapter of the Coastal Conservation Association Texas is also concerned by NWF's findings. “The NWF results underscore our concerns about the maintenance of freshwater inflows that are so important to our coastal fisheries,” said Ben Vaughan, III, the chair of CCA Texas’ water sub-committee. CCA Texas is one of the state's largest marine conservation associations with more than 48,000 active members.

At the heart of the problem is Texas’ historical practice of granting perpetual water permits without considering their effects on rivers and bays. “With this study, we’ve looked at what those effects are likely to be as more and more of the water authorized under these permits actually gets used,” said Myron Hess, NWF legal counsel. “If nothing is done, the outlook is grim, not just for fish and wildlife but for the tens of thousands of people who depend on the bays to make a living or who use them for recreation.”

Hess noted that over the last 100 years, the state has granted permits authorizing 23 million acre-feet of water to be taken from Texas' rivers and streams every year. Many permit holders are not using their full allotment of water right now, but that will change as the state's population grows. Hess said increased water demands likely will be met largely by using existing water permits more fully. And this means less water will be flowing to the coast.

Bays in Peril uses computer models developed for the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality to determine how much freshwater would make it to the bays if all existing water permits were used to their full capacity. The report then compares those results to state estimates of how much freshwater each bay needs. Sabine Lake, Galveston Bay, Matagorda Bay, San Antonio Bay and Corpus Christi Bay are most at risk, according to the study and receive "danger" rankings. The Upper Laguna Madre and the Copano/Aransas bays systems both receive "good" rankings in the study.

Hess said that despite the alarming results, Texas can still act to protect its bays. "First and foremost, we need to conserve water so we can meet human needs without unnecessarily harming the bays," he said. "Next, we need to adopt some common-sense legal protections for the coast." Among the remedies Hess cited: the state could reserve for inflow-protection purposes a portion of the water that has not been permitted yet, and add inflow protections to existing permits when they are sold. The state could also create new programs to encourage the voluntary conversion of some existing permits to inflow-protection purposes.

"We owe it to ourselves, our children and their children to be good stewards of these wonderful Texas coastal resources," Hess said. "If we act now, while there is still time, we can meet human water needs while protecting this amazing natural heritage for future generations."

The report is available at www.texaswatermatters.org.

Protecting wildlife through education and action since 1936, the [National Wildlife Federation](http://www.nwfed.org) is America's conservation organization creating solutions that balance the needs of people and wildlife now and for future generations.

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