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Texas river study seeks Louisiana participation

By TAMMY SHARP/News Editor April 25, 2008

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ORANGE, Texas - With the competition for Sabine River water growing, the Texas Instream Flow Program is asking anyone in the Sabine River Basin, including Louisiana residents, for input to help determine how much water should flow in the river for a healthy environment, according to a press release issued by directors of the program.

The Sabine River forms a portion of the boundary between Texas and Louisiana. Each state owns half of the river.

“This particular effort is only about establishing the environmental needs of the river,” said Mark Wentzel, a team leader in the surface water resources division of the Instream Flow Project. “What we do want from both sides is participation in development of the study design. We want the study to reflect the goals and values of the residents (along the river) in terms of protecting components of the river's ecosystem that they value the most.

“There will obviously need to be some coordination there (between Texas and Louisiana) in terms of how water is allocated for the river,” Wentzel said. “We would hope that the Sabine River Authority in Louisiana would be involved in the study design and the study itself. We have no stick and no carrot. But obviously both states are concerned about the environmental health of their river and with planning for the future.

Jim Pratt, executive director of the Sabine River Authority of Louisiana, plans on attending one of the

meetings, he said. “But Louisiana philosophy is not to give up any of Louisiana water allocation to satisfy an agency in Texas.”The two states are each allocated about one million acre feet per year by the Sabine River Compact Commission, the federal entity that governs the agreement between Texas and Louisiana concerning the river.

“Thus far we haven't had any objections to the current status quo from any Louisiana state agencies such as the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries or the Department of Natural Resources,” Pratt added.

“We have met or exceeded the historical flows downstream since the construction was completed in the sixties,” he continued. “Historical flow” refers to the flow of the river before the dam was constructed, Pratt explained.

In the early days, SRA of Louisiana released 100 cubit feet of water per second (cfs) to flow downstream, slightly higher than the historical flow, Pratt said. Later the agency modified that flow to 144 cubic feet per second, which can be maintained without the use of any valves. The previous flow of 100 cfs required the installation of a valve which wore out frequently. In addition, the 144 cfs keeps fresh water in the spillway channel, which is beneficial to the fish population downstream, and keeps salt water encroachment at sabine pass at its historical location.

The issue is not how much water is released, but how little can be released without adverse affects on habitats downstream. It's a Texas issue, Pratt said, not a Louisiana issue. “Any battle for changes will be done purely in Texas because they can't touch Louisiana water, and we have no reason to increase the flow.

It's certainly probably an honorable endeavor they're doing,” Pratt continued, referring to the Texas legislation that requires the state's agencies to study the same issue in all Texas rivers. “But they may have overlooked the fact that they have only half interest in the Sabine River.

In the meantime, Texas officials are encouraging everyone with a stake in the Sabine River to attend the meetings and contribute, said Barney Austin of the Texas Water Development Board, one of three Texas agencies jointly administering the Texas Instream Flow Program. The other two agencies are the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.The Sabine River Authority of Texas will also assist the agencies with these public meetings.

The Texas Instream Flow Program will study the lower part of the Sabine River basin, where about 415,000 people live on both sides of the Texas-Louisiana border. The meetings will be at 6:30 p.m. on May 6 and at 11:30 a.m. on May 7 in Orange, Texas. The public is invited to share local perspectives and knowledge about the river's water flow. For more information, visit www.twdb.state.tx.us.

shreveporttimes.com

May 5, 2008

Texas water meetings could impact Toledo Bend

By Vickie Welborn
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Louisiana's Sabine River Authority officials will be keeping an eye on their neighbors in Texas in the coming weeks as public meetings are scheduled to solicit input on the maintenance of that state's rivers and streams.

What, if anything, is ultimately decided could have an impact in Louisiana, too, since one of those waterways, the Sabine River, is shared by the adjoining states and is the source for Toledo Bend Reservoir. Of primary concern is if any change is made to the required flow of the Sabine River below the reservoir's dam.

"This could impact Toledo Bend by requiring additional releases from the reservoir for downstream environmental conditions," SRA Executive Director Jim Pratt said.

Doing so has the potential of undoing a long-sought agreement finally inked last year between the SRAs in Louisiana and Texas, as well as the utility companies that benefit from the reservoir's hydroelectric power plant, which requires power generation to cease once the 186,000-acre reservoir reaches 168 feet mean sea level.

"Texas Parks and Wildlife has published an initial study that requires more than historical flows in the lower Sabine, and my understanding is they have determined we need to continue to release approximately 1-million acre-feet during the May to September period, which is contrary to the 168 feet minimum we have agreed to," Pratt said.

Meetings Tuesday and Wednesday in Orange, Texas, will explain the technical studies and gather public knowledge and vision for the Sabine River.

The competition for river water to support the state's population and industries is putting pressure on the natural environment, a news release from the Texas Water Development Board states.

The Sabine River is the second largest behind the Brazos River in average volume of water flowing to the coast each year. Industry, cities, irrigators, recreationists and the environment are vying for the nearly 2 trillion gallons of water that flow to the mouth of the Sabine River in an average year.

"This is something that Texas has for all of its streams," Sabine Parish SRA Commissioner Larry Kelly said of the study. "It's a law that it passed over there. No quantity has been determined as far as I know for the Sabine River at this time. I think there have been some suggestions by the Wildlife and Fisheries "» but it's definitely nothing agreed to by the SRAs."

He agrees with Pratt that Louisianans need to pay attention because of the effect any instream flow changes could have on Toledo Bend.

The Sabine River begins in northeast Texas near Greenville and flows south making up the Texas-Louisiana border before flowing into the Gulf of Mexico. Total drainage of the basin is 9,756 square miles. The need for a sub basin study in the lower Sabine River is based upon the potential for substantial water transfers and Federal Energy Regulatory Commission hydropower relicensing at Toledo Bend Reservoir, the Texas Instream Flow Program preliminary study states.

Demand for water in the Texas portion of the Sabine Basin is expected to nearly double between 1990 and 2050, according to the Comprehensive Sabine Watershed Management Plan developed by the SRA of Texas. Droughts, floods and hurricanes also affect Sabine River flows.

The Texas Instream Flow Program will study the lower part of the Sabine River basin, where about 415,000 people live on both sides of the Texas-Louisiana border.

"The public and stakeholders are encouraged to provide local expertise and knowledge to ensure these studies are as good as they can be," said Barney Austin of the Texas Water Development Board, one of three state agencies jointly administering the Texas Instream Flow Program. The other two agencies are the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. The Texas SRA will also assist the agencies with these public meetings.

The environmental flows process will recommend how much water is needed by rivers and bays to support users — human, wildlife and plant life. State-appointed stakeholders will help shape recommendations on flow conditions for seven river basin and bay systems identified in the legislation. A river basin is the geographical area that drains water into the river.

The combined Sabine River, Neches River and Sabine Lake system is the first basin and bay system to hold an "e-flows" stakeholder meeting.

This is not the first time the Sabine River, and thus Toledo Bend, has been eyed for its water supply potential. In 2003, interest was expressed by Texas municipalities in the Dallas region to build a large pipeline to steer water from the upper Sabine River to that water-starved area. Texas entities to the south around Houston also have made no secret of their desire to divert water from the river.

The SRA of Louisiana like its counterparts in Texas has the rights to sell 1 million acre-feet (an acre-foot of water is 1 acre of land covered by 1 foot of water) of annual yield from the reservoir. Toledo Bend holds 4.4 million acre-feet at pool stage, which is 172 feet mean sea level.

Neither comes close to the ceiling. The Texas SRA sells to a smattering of water systems, but Louisiana sells more with customers such as the town of Many, city of Mansfield, DeSoto Waterworks No. 1, International Paper Company, Dolet Hills Power Plant, Ebarb Water System and South Toledo Bend Water System.

Kelly suspects the pipeline project, and thus a larger demand on the reservoir as a water source, will be revisited at some point. "I don't doubt that some day in the future, whether it's in my day or yours, that it will happen. Sooner or later Dallas will need more water than what they can get from their current sources and they'll be looking at it again."

Sabine River Authority Wants Your Input

Jessica Holloway Channel 6 TV
May 5, 2008 - 7:16PM

Competition for water is growing in the Sabine and Neches River Basins. Several state agencies are trying to find out if there's enough water flowing in the Sabine River to maintain a healthy environment. Jessica Holloway explains the agencies want to hear from you.

The Original Cajun Cookery has been serving up barbecue crabs for 15 years. The crabs come from Sabine Lake. Ithe first step of a state-wide study, agencies will meet in Orange to find out how people and industries use the Sabine River from Sabine Lake up through Toledo Bend. The study is to determine what effect changing the flow would have on the river.

"If the system's out of whack then you're not gonna have as optimum production of the crabs, the shrimp," said Jerry Clark with the Sabine River Authority.

"The crabs here are the lifeline of my restaurant. If I don't have blue crabs then I don't have a specialty. People come to eat these crabs," Don Pastor with the Original Cajun Cookery.

The Sabine River is a storehouse of water. Basically it's a huge asset in Southeast Texas. As long as there's plenty of rainfall there's pretty stable conditions. One concern is during a drought, whether there would there be enough water to support recreational activities such as boating, canoeing and fishing.

Eventually cities like Dallas could run out of water and may want to tap into the Sabine River Basin. The goal is to determine how projects like that would affect the environment and the people living in it. It's all about finding the right balance between economic interest and the ecosystem.

You can attend a public hearing Tuesday night at seven or Wednesday at noon. Both are at the Garden District off Highway 87 in Orange.

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05/07/2008

Public meetings shed light on study of Southeast Texas waterways

By HEATHER NOLAN , The Enterprise

ORANGE - As an avid fisherman and Louisiana plastics plant manager, Robert Dupree thinks he has reason to be concerned about the growing demand for water in the area.

And he does, according to Wendy Gordon, a representative from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, who said industrial expansions and a growing state population are putting more demand on Texas' portion of the Sabine River basin.

Jack Tatum, water resources manager for the Sabine River Authority, said the water rights system does not have water designated for the growing environment and population.

IF YOU GO

What: Texas Instream Flow Program Public Meeting.

Where: The Garden District, 7536 Texas 87 North in Orange (across from Little Cypress-Mauriceville High School).

When: 11:30 a.m. today.

To prevent potential problems, state lawmakers created the Texas Instream Flow Program in 2001, she said.

About 40 people attended a public meeting the group hosted Tuesday night at The Garden District, 7536 Texas 87 North in Orange. Leaders discussed the program and gave an overview of studies they are conducting on four river basins in the state.

Gordon said the program's goal is to determine how much water is needed to maintain a healthy environment for rivers and streams.

"Up until now, we never had a mandate to study Texas rivers," she said.

The program involves the Texas Water Development Board, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

The scientific study will have five parts - aquatic life and habitats, water quality, the relationship between rivers and the surrounding land, the movement on nutrients and organisms and stream channel formation.

Another meeting is at 11:30 a.m. today at the same location.