

Caddo Lake flow standards draft approved

By Steve Bandy, News Messenger

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JEFFERSON — A draft set of flow standards for tributaries of Caddo Lake and strategies for regulating that flow will be forwarded to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality as a direct result of the two-day workshop held here.

Scientists, water managers and Caddo Lake Watershed stakeholders descended upon the Jeffersonian Institute beginning Tuesday to further plans for the development of an environmental flow standard — a more natural cycle of low and high flows rather than the steady flow as regulated by the dam at Lake O' the Pines — for Big Cypress, Little Cypress and Black Cypress bayous, all of which ultimately feed into Caddo Lake.

The Wednesday and Thursday meeting was the fourth in a series of workshops initiated in December 2004 by the Caddo Lake Institute and The Nature Conservancy, in partnership with the Northeast Texas Municipal Water District, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and others.

During previous workshops, participants developed "building blocks" outlining the required water releases from Lake O' the Pines to re-create a scenario close to the pre-dam flow of the bayous. However, the building blocks in some cases called for a greater release of water than is possible from the gates at the Ferrells Bridge Dam, which can only release a maximum of 3,000 cubic feet per second (cfs).

The 10-year plan outlined in the original building blocks called for releases as high as 6,000 cfs every two to three years and up to 20,000 cfs every 10 years.

The building blocks were tweaked to within the physical constraints of the dam to regulate base and low flow.

"We will have to identify opportunities to store additional water in Lake O' the Pines to provide additional water for releases into Big Cypress," said Jeff Opperman of TNC's Global Freshwater Team. "We understand that some of the building block requests may be unattainable and we will work with TCEQ on these.

"Meanwhile, we can proceed with the standards even if all those standards cannot be met."

Noting the almost pristine condition of Black Cypress Bayou, the group will present a plan to TCEQ consisting mostly of narrative "using scientific literature and input from stakeholders," instead of a predetermined set of flow charts and requirements, Opperman said.

He said the standards will be three-fold:

To protect the few existing water rights in the bayou.

To be flexible enough to allow for future limited water rights.

To prohibit the construction of a reservoir that would restrict the natural hydrology.

"What we're going for is a higher level of protection for a broader range of flows here," he said.

The plan for Little Cypress Bayou is a hybrid of the building blocks and narrative.

"Little has more water rights established and more potential for the proliferation of water rights," Opperman said.

In addition, the future of Little Cypress is more in limbo than that of the other, according to Walt Sears, general manager of the Northeast Texas Municipal Water District.

"There is a possibility for impoundment there," he said, referring plans discussed at the state level for the construction of a dam on the waterway. "A lot of it will depend on the future needs of Marshall, Longview and other areas in the Sabine Watershed."

He said the establishment of a reservoir on Little Cypress Bayou is in TCEQ's 50-year plan.

Sears generalized the thinking of TCEQ as: "They don't think they'll need Black Cypress; they know they will need the existing reservoir in Big Cypress; they think they may need water from Little Cypress."

A complete draft of the recommendation will be prepared and dispersed to participants. Meanwhile, the group planned to monitor the progress of the plan for three years before possible tweaking it.

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