

Waterflow topic of workshop

By Steve Bandy, News Messenger

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JEFFERSON — Manipulating the release of water into the Caddo Lake Watershed to create a more natural environmental flow standard in the connecting waterways and the lake itself is the ultimate goal of the continuing series of Cypress Basin Flow Workshops, the fourth of which currently is under way here.

Scientists, water managers and watershed stakeholders converged on the Jeffersonian Institute Tuesday to review steps already taken and discuss various "building blocks" in the development and implementation of a final plan.

The normal flow of the various bayous — Big Cypress, Little Cypress, Black Cypress, James and others — was interrupted by the construction of the Ferrells Bridge Dam on Big Cypress Bayou, creating Lake O' the Pines.

The reservoir was created as part of the overall plan for flood control in the Red River Basin below Denison Dam in Oklahoma and was authorized by the Flood Control Act of 1946.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began construction of the dam in January 1955. It was completed on Dec. 11, 1959.

"Environmental flow is somewhat of a new concept," Jeff Opperman of The Nature Conservancy's Global Freshwater Team told the near-capacity crowd in the large conference room at The Jeffersonian Tuesday morning.

He explained that "environmental flow" includes the highs and lows that the body of water would have experienced without human intervention, including periodic "over-the-bank" flooding.

"A functioning river requires more than a steady flow. You have to look at the full spectrum," he said.

Opperman explained that establishing an environmental flow is more complicated than simply opening and closing the gates at Lake O' the Pines.

"There are multiple components to the project — how the reservoir is operated and managed, how the rivers are flowing, and more," he said.

TNC works closely with the Corps of Engineers on such projects because, as Opperman pointed out, "The Corps is the single largest manager of water with more than 600 dams in the United States."

Besides simply determining how a particular body of water once flowed — and flooded — the project must take into consideration the effect any modern flooding would have on the population.

"We have to find a trade-off — a balance — between the natural flow and the human-altered systems," said Ryan Smith of the Texas Chapter of TNC.

Workshop

Most of Tuesday afternoon was spent in break-out sessions at which attendees participated in discussions on wide-ranging topics, from high flows to low flows, from physical limits to legal limits on establishing an environmental flow.

The results of those break-out sessions will be discussed at the workshop's general closing session today.

This year's workshop is the fourth in a series that was initiated in December 2004 by the Caddo Lake Institute and TNC, in partnership with the Northeast Texas Municipal Water District, the Corps of Engineers and others.

Begun before the Texas Legislature enacted Senate Bill 3, a law establishing a process for setting aside reservoir water for in-stream flows in Texas, the project expanded in 2006 with the creation of the Caddo Lake Watershed Protection Plan, a process to protect the water quality of the rivers, streams and lakes in the basin.

Rick Lowerre, president of the Caddo Lake Institute, pointed out that the Caddo Basin is in a unique situation because, of the five basins covered by SB 3, only Caddo has no time constraints set by the legislation. "The Caddo Basin's needs can be met by a voluntary consensus. That's exactly what we're all here for."

Today's session will kick off at 9 a.m. with reports from Wednesday afternoon's break-out sessions. An overall discussion of results of the workshop will begin at 10 a.m. with the session scheduled to close at noon.