

Protection sought: Caddo Lake stakeholders take first step to secure watershed

[By BRIDGETTE R. OUTTEN, News Messenger]

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JEFFERSON – Local stakeholders reached a consensus on Friday to go forward with pursuing a watershed protection plan for Caddo Lake.

Friday's meeting was held from 1-5 p.m. at the Jefferson Institute, 120 E. Austin St. in Jefferson. It was the first of its kind, and was designed to bring people with interests in the Caddo Lake area to decide what – if anything—should be done about the area's problems.

"Today is the first step of what is likely to be a long process in which people have the opportunity to discuss and debate every issue possible," said Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) commissioner Larry Soward. "(They will) throw out some options, discuss solutions, and at some point down the line, will start developing a strategy that we can implement and how we can go about implementing it."

The TCEQ, Northeast Texas Municipal Water District (NETMWD) and the Jeffersonian Institute hosted the meeting, where the majority of the approximately 120 attendees was in favor of putting measures in place to decrease some of the issues at Caddo Lake.

Representatives from The Nature Conservancy, Caddo Lake Institute, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and the U.S. Geological Survey/National Wetland Research Center (USGS/NWRC) presented elaborate slide presentations in the first segment of the meeting, complete with detailed diagrams, to first educate stakeholders on what Caddo Lake is facing.

Some issues that were discussed include overviews of water quality, aquatic vegetation, the wetlands and the geographic scope of the lake. Officials emphasized that Caddo Lake is not in imminent danger – yet, but steps need to be taken to avoid future issues.

"The whole key is: what (problems) do we need to address," said Soward. "We need preventative measures that are both short-term and long-term."

The first step in creating those measures lies in gathering together the group of diverse stakeholders, which is anyone who: lives in the Caddo Lake basin and/or watershed; uses the water resource; is affected by water quality/quantity problems; or is directly affected by project outcomes, according to TCEQ's Linda Brookins.

Diversifying the stakeholders was accomplished at the meeting, said NETMWD's general manager Walt Sears, and will lend expertise from different perspectives. NETMWD is actively looking for more stakeholders to participate in the planning.

"It was an extremely large turn out, with a very diverse group," Sears said. "This meeting was also about getting the stakeholders together and asking them who else we need to get to the meeting."

Attendee Richard Subia, academic coordinator at Southwestern Oklahoma State University, is one stakeholder that will inform others about upcoming initiatives. Subia said that he is a Caddo member of Caddo Nation, a group of Native Americans that relocated from the region to Oklahoma in the 1850s.

"I want to see that the members of the Caddo Nation be involved as a stakeholder," Subia said, who made an 8-hour drive to get to the meeting. "One reason is because this is the indigenous land of the Caddo Nation...I would like to make sure that we are involved in decisions because this affects us today and it will affect us in the future."

Participants in the first meeting were also able to discuss other concerns, which included things like better monitoring of septic systems, the possibility of a gated dam on Caddo Lake and making sure that stakeholders from the Louisiana side of the lake were able to offer suggestions as well.

"The more stakeholders that we have, the more input we will have for brainstorming opportunities," said Brian Breeding, director of public works and water utilities in Marshall. Breeding also said that the meeting was very informative in giving a broad understanding of how Caddo Lake Watershed actually works.

The next meeting for the Caddo Lake Watershed Protection Plan will probably be in May, according to officials.

But until then, stakeholder Janette Pace Boswell said she is satisfied with the way the organizational meeting turned out.

"Every time I look at the lake, I'll feel encouraged that this meeting was held," said Ms. Pace Boswell, who lives on Potter's Point, which is on the other side of Marshall.

"I just think it was a wonderful start to protecting our only natural lake in Texas," she said.

For information about the Caddo Lake Watershed Protection Plan or upcoming meetings, contact Walt Sears at (903) 639-7538.

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Meeting on Caddo watershed this afternoon in Jefferson

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Friday, February 03, 2006

JEFFERSON – Local and state officials will meet today to develop new ways to protect the Caddo Lake Watershed.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Equality, Northeast Texas Municipal Water District and the Jeffersonian Institute will be holding the meeting from 1 to 5 p.m. at the Jeffersonian Institute, 120 E. Austin St. in Jefferson.

It is the first time that such a meeting will take place, according to NETMWD water general manager Walt Sears.

"This effort is a meeting to come to a consensus and work in a cooperative way led by local stakeholders," Sears said. "And a stakeholder is anyone who has an interest in Caddo Lake."

The public is encouraged to attend to discuss some of the area's problems, including the flow of water in the lake, the quality of the water and the presence of noxious vegetation – like hydrilla and water hyacinth – that interferes with people's use of the lake, Sears said.

"Caddo Lake is a unique and valuable natural treasure to both East Texas and to the state as a whole," Larry Soward, TCEQ commissioner, said in a recent press release. "We welcome full public participation as we all work together to develop strategies and plans to protect this remarkable resource."

Representatives from The Nature Conservancy, Caddo Lake Institute, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and East Texas Baptist University will also be present.

For more information, contact Walt Sears at NETMWD at (903) 639-7538.

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