

State environmental agency hosts meeting on Caddo's future

|By JULIA ROBB, Special Projects Editor|

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KARNACK – A group of Caddo Lake-area residents who believe they have a stake in the lake's health met Wednesday and elected Northeast Texas Municipal Water District Manager Walt Sears as their watershed coordinator.

Fifty-four residents voted for Sears.

Sears did not have an opponent and no one at the meeting expressed opposition to Sears' election.

Sears will be in charge of recruiting work groups to supply input for a grant request he and his staff will be in charge of writing and submitting to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, said Linda Brookins, a Texas Commission on Environmental Quality staffer who chaired the stakeholders' meeting.

The stakeholders must also approve the grant because Sears and the work groups must specify what the money will be used for, Ms. Brookins said.

She said much of the grant money will be used to write a water protection plan for the lake.

Sears later said the water district as a whole "wants the job because the stakeholders need to cooperate with each other and we want to try to facilitate that."

Sears said his staff will help him do the work, because after all, "we are in the business of water quality and water quantity."

Several attendees pointed out that people living in other parts of the watershed besides the lake were not present in numbers, and were being left out of the planning process.

The watershed begins west of Pittsburg and includes Big Cypress Bayou and several other bayous which flow into Caddo Lake.

Ms. Brookins said the state will attempt to bring more people from the watershed to future meetings.

It may be more difficult to help the lake than anyone has anticipated.

Engineering and science consultant Joseph Trungale – hired by The Caddo Institute – said in an interview that although a group of scientists the institute brought together have made recommendations that need to be tested regarding the lake, it hasn't been possible because nature hasn't cooperated.

Due to last year's severe drought, water levels at Lake O' the Pines have been too low to make experimental releases of water down Big Cypress, he said, adding the lake is still a foot below normal.

Lake O' the Pines must fill back up before the releases can be made, he said.

Trungale said scientists believe Caddo needs different flow levels to restore the lake's health.

But even high flows that flush nutrients from the lake, for example, might not be enough to solve the problem of invasive plants, which the nutrients feed, according to Paul Price, an Austin engineering consultant.

Invasive plants are choking the lake and reducing the amount of oxygen that fish need to survive.

But Price said in an interview it will do no good to flush the lake when the water supposed to flush the lake is itself loaded with nutrients.

Lake O' the Pines supplies much of the water to Caddo Lake, through Big Cypress, but nutrients are also being flushed into Lake O' the Pines and Big Cypress, he said, citing chicken litter fertilizer used by farmers, plus animal and human waste.

"You have to work on the entire watershed. You can do very little with the lake itself," he said.

The state has worked with chicken raisers to limit the amount of fertilizer that flows into waterways, but Price said the state may need to work with other groups as well.

Patrick Roques, a TCEQ staffer, said he hopes local residents will take over planning how to save the lake.

"Caddo will be around a long time and the population will continue to grow, so we are trying to prevent long-term (lake) decline," he said.

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