

# Water Quality

## Vital resource must be protected

The Cypress Creek watershed north of Longview that is among the first five watersheds targeted for pollution abatement by the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission is just a drop in the bucket in terms of state needs. Of 368 Texas watersheds, 140 are not in compliance with state surface water quality standards.

It's dreadful that more than one-third of the state's rivers, lakes and streams are substandard. The actions being taken by TNRCC to protect vital water resources are long overdue and it's sad that it will take five years to complete studies on the first 40 watersheds before pollution limits are determined. In industrial and economic development terms, water is frequently called the "white oil of the future." It is important to the tourism and recreation industries and to water sports enthusiasts. Water also is vital to all living things.

TNRCC can't tackle this massive problem alone. It needs the help of the Texas Railroad Commission, which last year began a pilot program to inventory oil, chemical and other pipelines along the Sabine River. The results of the Sabine River project provided a real education for state officials who found abandoned pipelines whose owners could not be identified. The inventory of what passes through the pipelines, a list of the pipeline owners and points of contact for emergencies, will enhance spill response programs and encourage pipeline owners to conduct periodic maintenance checks. A similar inventory should be conducted in the Cypress Creek watershed.

Local governments also must become involved in returning watersheds to standards compatible with their recreational and municipal uses. In September 1995, the severe drought allowed algae and bacteria to cause an odious aroma and taste to Sabine River water that is used by many Longview residents. City Manager Ted Willis took a daylong canoe trip from the city's water treatment plant to the bridge at Texas 42. He found the river

had petroleum distillates and chlorides — a major concern — along with evidence of illegal dumping, including oil drums.

This type of direct involvement must become widespread. City and county governments, area water districts and other entities must take the initiative to seek out pollution problems and to report them to proper authorities. Regional law enforcement agencies must actively pursue illegal dumpers — including those industries that are not responsible in waste discharge — and prosecute them.

Land owners, farmers and ranchers must help by controlling animal waste that can create unsafe levels of bacteria that drain into streams, rivers and lakes. Runoff from pesticides and other toxic substances also must be controlled.

It's difficult to imagine any person saying they want to willfully pollute Texas' water resources, but it is done every day by people who dump harmful substances, such as oil, on the ground where it may seep into a watershed. Anyone who fishes on East Texas lakes or rivers has seen evidence of polluters. TNRCC, Texas Parks and Wildlife, the Texas Department of Agriculture and other pertinent state agencies should mount an educational effort similar to the Texas Department of Transportation's successful "Don't Mess With Texas" program. Also, the Legislature should enact tougher penalties for polluters.

Texas should be a world-class leader in having pristine lakes, rivers and streams. Throughout Texas' history, water has been the state's most vital asset and its most constant need. It has created range wars, cattle empires and vast fortunes. Today, as we learned from the severe drought of 1995, it affects our daily lives. Texas' water needs are so great that we cannot afford to have so polluted th

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