

Officials: 'Don't mess with Texas lakes and Rivers'

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By Rick Lowerre

Last Thursday, this newspaper published an excellent story alerting East Texas to the alarming proposal by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality to allow public exposure to greater risks of disease from swimming or water-skiing in lakes and canoeing, fishing or splashing around in our rivers and streams.

But there are additional troubling aspects of this proposal East Texans should understand. In addition to allowing more bacteria into our rivers, streams and lakes, the TCEQ has targeted our Cypress Basin for lower oxygen standards, which is the level of dissolved oxygen in the water that largely determines whether fish will live or die.

In fact, until these proposed changes, no one would have imagined Caddo Lake had anything in common with the Houston Ship Channel. But the state proposes to allow rivers and streams feeding Caddo Lake to drop at times to the same intolerably low-water quality standards for dissolved oxygen as in the Houston Ship Channel, a notoriously polluted industrial waterway serving the Port of Houston.

The Caddo Lake watershed is the test case for dissolved oxygen in East Texas.

The proposed standard would allow dissolved oxygen levels to drop to 1.5 milligrams per liter in three rivers flowing to Caddo Lake: Black Cypress, Little Cypress and James Bayou. The Houston Ship Channel is the only other place in Texas where dissolved oxygen is legally permitted to go that low. In fact, no other state in our region permits dissolved oxygen levels below 2.0 milligrams per liter anywhere, much less in an ecologically sensitive and important watershed such as Caddo.

The basis of the proposed change is a complex and experimental equation that would first be used in the Caddo watershed. If it is approved, the rest of East Texas should expect similar treatment.

As with the bacteria in our waters, low-dissolved oxygen is often the result of too much runoff of manure from feedlots and other large animal factory-type farms. The components of the runoff take up oxygen, leaving low dissolved oxygen levels in the water.

On June 30, TCEQ will decide whether to lower dissolved oxygen standards in the Cypress River Basin and the lower bacteria standards in all parts of Texas. Across Texas, there are many, including local governments and elected officials, who have already come out against the lower bacteria standard.

But, because the dissolved oxygen standard will initially only affect the Cypress Basin, East Texans must speak up. Bass fishing clubs are already on the case, urging TCEQ to drop its proposal. So are some residents from other parts of East Texas who know they are next. But, we who love Caddo Lake and the larger watershed, need to take the lead.

The recent closure of public swimming beaches at Lake O' the Pines, because of high levels of E. coli, highlighted the problems with bacteria in our water. In addition to significant threats to public health from the E. coli and other disease-causing organisms that accompany E. coli but are not measured, the pollution will certainly affect the economic interests of those whose businesses rely upon people coming to the beaches at the lake.

That same is true with dissolved oxygen problems. First, we will see dead fish in our waters. Then, as newspapers cover the stories, fishing interest drops and guides, marina and fish camps will suffer.

We all want to support our agricultural producers and the economic values that result from raising cows and chickens in East Texas. But there are other economic interests, and importantly, the public health that must be protected.

TCEQ is governed by an unelected set of three commissioners appointed by the governor. But, fortunately, they still listen to the governor and other elected officials. Because we have the votes, we can ensure our elected officials listen to us. Let your statewide and local elected officials know you care about the Caddo Lake watershed and all of our state's magnificent waters.

Tell them to get TCEQ to back off these bad ideas. Tell them not to mess with the standards for bacteria and dissolved oxygen.

Rick Lowerre is president of the Caddo Lake Institute.