

Basin flow plan gets preliminary OK

By Steve Bandy, News Messenger

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JEFFERSON — Silence speaks volumes.

There being no opposition voiced to any of the stipulations put forth in the draft summary of recommendations for flow control in the Cypress Basin, Rick Lowerre said he would consider "a consensus has been reached" following a stakeholders' meeting here Thursday.

Lowerre, president of the Caddo Lake Institute, said he will wait until March 5 before he presents the draft — as a final report — to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

The 12-page draft can be downloaded from the Institute's Web site, www.caddolakeinstitute.us.

The document details the results of the Dec. 2-4 Cypress Basin Flows Workshop and Caddo Lake Watershed Protection Plan - Hydrology Work Group meeting also at the Jeffersonian. The workshop was the third in a series of events aimed at developing proposals for environmental flows in the Cypress Basin, a project initiated in 2004 by the Caddo Lake Institute and the Nature Conservancy in partnership with U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and others.

This project was started after the state made the decision that no new water rights would be granted for protection of flows in rivers, lakes and bays. Instead, the state proposed, and has now enacted as law (Senate Bill 3), to provide a process for setting aside water for instream flows in Texas, Lowerre explained.

"The project seeks to assure adequate instream flows to sustain the ecological, recreational and economic values of Caddo Lake and its watershed," he said.

To reach its goal, the project has these objectives:

An Environmental Flow Reservation or Set Aside: A basis to seek a state-approved reservation of water for environmental flows in the Caddo Lake watershed, reflecting the flow regimes needed to restore and maintain the ecology and water quality of the system and to enhance economic development in the region.

A New Release Rule for Lake O' the Pines: A technical basis for a change in the operations of the dam by the North East Texas Municipal Water District and the Corps of Engineers for a more natural pattern of releases needed downstream in Big Cypress Creek and Caddo Lake, while assuring flood control, water supply and the other purposes of the reservoir.

Adaptive management for the long term: The project will continue to obtain new information and refine environmental flow regimes based on experimentation, research and further analysis.

Progress

Based on a series of meetings with natural resource experts from Texas and elsewhere and with the stakeholders in the watershed, the project has resulted in "Building Blocks" — or recommendations — for instream flow regimes to provide for variations in annual and seasonal flows that will best protect fish and wildlife that are dependent upon a healthy ecosystem.

An adaptive management approach has been used, where draft Building Blocks are developed, tested in the field, and adjusted as a better understanding of the flows and their values are developed, according to Lowerre.

The project is relying upon recommendations of the methodology developed by the National Academy of Sciences for the State of Texas on protection of environmental flows; the experience of the TNC-Corps of Engineers Sustainable Rivers Program in other parts of the country; and several recent Texas laws on environmental flows.

"Much of the scientific work needed to reach the objectives has been completed, though there still is a lot of data to be gathered," Lowerre said.

Environmental flow standards were adopted for Big Cypress Bayou, Black Cypress Bayou, Little Cypress Bayou, James Bayou and other streams flowing into Caddo Lake.

Recommended strategies presented in the draft include:

Extension of dates for maintaining the recreational pool (in Lake O' the Pines) from the current period of May 20 to Sept. 30 to the entire year to provide and additional 18 inches of storage of water that could be set aside to be released down stream for environmental flows.

Raising the level of the storage pool to reallocate some flood storage and provide additional water that could be released for environmental flows.

Purchasing, leasing or otherwise acquiring access to water currently appropriated but not currently needed or projected to be needed.

Included in the recommendations will be a new "release rule" for Lake O' the Pines. This recommendation, if approved by TCEQ, would change the operations of the dam to provide a more natural pattern of releases while assuring flood control, water supply and other purposes of the reservoir.

Lowerre urges all stakeholders to view the draft summary and make any comments to rl@caddolake.us by the March 5 deadline.