

Decision on TPWD's future funding nears

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Photo By Picasa

The 2014-15 budget being considered by the Texas Legislature would modestly increase funding for battling non-native, invasive aquatic plants such as giant salvinia, here smothering the surface of a cypress swamp along the Trinity River.

Texas' state parks could get a modest boost in funding, the state's nearly moribund program to battle invasive aquatic species threatening the state's waterways and fisheries might see a little life breathed into it, and, depending on what happens in the next few days, a million dollars a year in hunters' license/stamp fees could be funneled to efforts aimed at solving the vexing collapse of bobwhite quail populations in the state.

Decisions on those issues as well as a bevy of proposed changes in laws affecting Texas boaters, anglers, campers, hunters and others who enjoy outdoor recreation will be decided in the coming eight days as the Texas Legislature winds down its 83rd regular session.

Divvying the money

While little is dead-solid certain until the 140-day biennial session ends on May 27, the Legislature's continuously morphing drafts of the state appropriations bill give strong indications of how much money will be devoted to outdoors- or natural resource-related programs and how legislators mandate that money will be spent.

With barely a week left in the session, here's a look at the direction the Legislature's budget-writing members are leaning on outdoor recreation-related issues:

1After stripping millions from Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's appropriations - \$20 million from state park appropriations and millions from fish- and wildlife-related programs - during its 2011 session, the Legislature is looking to return some of that funding for the coming two fiscal years.

Senate and House versions of the appropriations bill, which a conference committee may well have hammered into a final bill within the past few hours, include overall increases in spending authority for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, with both boosting funding for state park operations.

The House bill increases the agency's two-year (2014-15) appropriation to about \$554.3 million, up from \$550.7 for the past two years.

The Senate version has a slightly higher increase, to about \$588 million over the two fiscal years.

Each bumps spending associated with parks - state park operations, support and minor repairs to those parks - considerably.

The Senate proposal increases the parks-associated appropriations for the coming two years to about \$170.6 million, up from the \$144 million of the past two years. The House proposes \$168.5 million for parks for the coming two years.

Both bills include in state park appropriations and an increase in the amount of revenue generated through state sales tax paid on purchases of sporting goods. The 2012-13, two-year budget funneled about \$92.3 million of sales tax revenue to TPWD. The Senate proposes increasing that to \$130 million, and the House version appropriates about \$112 million in sales tax revenue.

TPWD depends heavily on appropriations from the so-called "sporting goods sales tax" to subsidize state park operations; most years, the sales tax revenue accounts for about 45 percent of state park funding.

State sales tax paid on the purchase of sporting goods - the same sales tax paid on all taxable goods in the state - generates about \$250 million over a two-year budget cycle. The Legislature in 2007 passed a law dedicating 94 percent of that revenue to TPWD but included language allowing the Legislature to decide just how much of that 94 percent it would appropriate to the agency. Since that 2007 change, TPWD has not received more than about a quarter of the sporting goods sales tax revenue.

As during the past two sessions, members of the Legislature filed bills that would have removed the Legislature's authority to appropriate only a portion of the sporting goods sales tax revenue to state parks, ensuring TPWD would receive the full 94 percent of the funds. And just as with those earlier proposals, the bills went nowhere.

The budget bloodletting over the past two sessions of the Texas Legislature has left the state's invasive aquatic species management programs little money with which to battle the fast-spreading onslaught of giant salvinia, hydrilla, zebra mussels and other non-native plants and animals causing severe ecological and economic damage.

Losing ground

The Legislature whacked funding for TPWD staff and the expensive equipment and herbicides used to slow the spread of fisheries-destroying invasives to barely \$400,000 for the past few years. With that penny-wise, pound-foolish funding, the agency has been able to treat only about 3 percent of the 150-square-miles -and-growing invasive infestations in the state.

While Texas has been losing ground to invasive aquatics because of poor funding, states such as Louisiana, which spends \$8 million a year treating invasive aquatic plants, and Florida, which appropriates about \$19 million a year fighting non-native plants in its waters, have made progress or at least kept the plants at bay

The Texas House proposes increasing funding for invasive aquatic plant programs to \$1.7 million a year. The Senate proposes a slight increase to about \$570,000.

Bobwhite quail populations across the iconic game birds' range have precipitously declined over the past decades, with once-premier quail states such as South Carolina and Georgia holding only 10 percent as many wild quail as they did just four decades ago.

While the quail disappearance has not been as stunning or complete in Texas as it has in some other states, it has been considerable and widespread. Some estimates are that Texas' current population of quail population is only 30 percent of what it was less than four decades ago, the birds have all but disappeared from the eastern half of the state and their range and abundance continues shrinking.

Texas wildlife managers, scientists and landowners have been scrambling to decipher causes of the continuing decline and develop land management practices that best benefit quail, allowing the birds to begin rebuilding flagging numbers. The effort has been daunting and expensive. And the quail conundrum has drawn the interest of politicians.

The Texas House's appropriations bill includes a mandate that TPWD spend \$1 million each of the coming two years to contract with Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service in an effort to address the quail decline.

Combating quail decline

Under the Northern Bobwhite Quail Interagency Contract, AgriLife would use the money to fund research into the impact of diseases, parasites and toxins on quail, develop diagnostic tests for those diseases, map quails' genome, conduct field studies on environmental factors impacts on quail populations and develop a centralized repository for quail-related research.

The Senate's appropriations bill does not include a similar mandate.

But even if the mandate to spend \$1 million a year on quail research isn't included in the final appropriations bill, look for TPWD to increase its funding of quail-related projects. They can take a hint.