

Residents opposing reservoir proposal

By CHRISTINE S. DIAMOND, The Lufkin Daily News

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A proposed reservoir for Cherokee and Anderson counties to quench the city of Dallas' thirst would flood an area planned for a wildlife refuge, as well as part of the historic Texas State Railroad between Rusk and Palestine.

The Dallas City Council will decide next month whether to continue studies for the proposed Fastrill Reservoir, which would flood 27,000 acres along the Neches River, and another new lake, Marvin Nichols, in northeast Texas.

Many residents of Cherokee and Anderson counties oppose the plan.

"I don't want my property affected by it," said Anderson County resident Lydia Haydon, who learned of the planned lake a few weeks ago. "They say lakefront property is higher, but I didn't choose to live on a lake.

"The Neches River is really pretty. We live four miles from the river. My neighbors don't want it, either."

What Haydon enjoys most about her 33 wooded acres is sitting on her porch and listening to the whistle of the Texas State Railroad's old steam engines passing through the woods.

"I know it will affect the railroad. I don't think it should be tampered with at all. It's part of our heritage," Haydon said. "When we are all outside we hear the train whistle and I make everyone be quiet to hear it go through."

Conservationists and ecologists also are concerned about how the lake would wipe out the state's last undisturbed hardwood bottomlands.

"We are totally opposed to Fastrill Reservoir," said Janice Bezanson with Texas Committee on Natural Resources. "First, because it is not needed by anybody ... and secondly it would flood 27,000 acres of what is the very best bottomland hardwood forest left in Texas."

At one time, bottomland hardwood forest comprised of 16 million acres in Texas, Bezanson said. Today, more than 75 percent of those bottomlands have been converted to other uses.

The impact of damming the Neches River would be seen as far away as the Big Thicket National Preserve, Bezanson said.

For more than 20 years, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been working to create the Neches National Wildlife Refuge in Cherokee and Anderson counties. Public meetings were recently held on the proposal.

"In essence, if the dam went in, it would flood the entire refuge," said Jim Neal, a wildlife biologist with Fish and Wildlife in Nacogdoches. "There would be a very small portion on the northern end that wouldn't be inundated by the dam. It would result in the destruction of one of the highest quality bottomland forests we have remaining in the state."

Plans for the wildlife refuge began in the early 1980s but were shelved for lack of money to purchase needed land from "willing owners," including Temple-Inland, Neal said. Looking back, Neal said that if his agency had gone ahead and pursued the habitat, "we'd be much better off today."

In recent years, Fish and Wildlife resumed planning for the wildlife refuge, which would comprise 25,000 acres of "mostly bottomland hardwood forest, wetlands along the Neches River in Anderson and Cherokee counties," Neal said.

While not ideal for human residents, the bottomlands are "valuable for a wide variety of wildlife species," creating "a really, really diverse habitat," Neal said. More than 100 bird species, including a wide variety of water fowl, and rare plants are found in the area.

"We are still hopeful that we will be able to get the refuge established," Neal said.

Neal stressed that if the refuge is approved, land acquisition would be on a completely voluntary basis. By contrast, Dallas could force residents to sell their land, whether they wanted to or not.

Also, Neal said, the property purchased for the national wildlife refuge would be managed for wildlife purposes with no restrictions on adjacent landowners. Although camping is unlikely, people would be able to hike, canoe, photograph, hunt and fish on the refuge, according to Neal.

National wildlife refuges usually spur eco-tourism in the surrounding area, he said. As an example, the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge draws "tens of thousands of people a year to see the whooping cranes wintering there," Neal said.

Fish and Wildlife would also hire professional biologists and technicians to manage the refuge, Neal said.

State Rep. Chuck Hopson, D-Jacksonville, wrote the Dallas City Council last week.

"I know that my constituents share my concerns regarding the effect of these proposed reservoirs," he wrote. "They constantly fear the loss of their private property due to the water needs of our metropolitan areas. ... I believe it is my duty to make sure we approach projects such as these in a careful and methodical way, giving much consideration to the ultimate impact on our landowners that are affected most."

Hopson and many other state officials expressed their concern that Dallas City Council was "considering new reservoirs while existing resources available to you appear to be far from fully utilized."

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(Note: highlights added)