

Coordinated Watershed Protection in Southeast and South Central Texas

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Update from Regional Watershed Coordinator

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Welcome to our second newsletter, I hope you enjoyed the inaugural issue. Since our last newsletter we held the March 9 WCSC meeting in Columbus, where members were given an update on recent watershed planning activities within the Wharton Region. Also, Nikki Dictson provided an update on the Texas Watershed Steward Program and the Plum Creek Watershed Partnership. Time was given for discussion and questions concerning Plum Creek including monitoring data, data collection, and partnership structure. A photo tour of Plum Creek was also given, including maps and other information demonstrating the challenges required to restore the water quality in Plum Creek.

WCSC Meeting Schedule

June 8, 2006
 September 7, 2006
 December 7, 2006
 March 8, 2007

Three other entities currently involved in Watershed Protection Plans within the Wharton Region service area presented overviews of their respective projects at the March 9th meeting. The first presentation was the Dickinson Bayou Watershed Partnership presented by Susan Benner from Texas Sea



Garcitas Creek in Victoria County. Photo by Brian Koch.

Grant; Susan is the Watershed Coordinator for the partnership. Next, was the Upper San Antonio River Watershed Protection Plan, presented by Steve Lusk, from the San Antonio River Authority. The third presentation was by Carl Masterson from the Houston-Galveston Area Council on the proposed Bastrop Bayou Watershed Protection Plan.

Also, EPA's *Handbook for Developing Watershed Plans to Restore and Protect our Waters* is available at

http://www.epa.gov/owow/nps/watershed_handbook/

For more information on the Regional WCSC, including meeting summaries and presentations at the meetings please visit

http://www.tsswcb.state.tx.us/programs/wharton_wcsc.html.

Plum Creek Watershed

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Coming up in April, we are holding three public meetings across the watershed to engage stakeholders in this process through serving on the steering committee or a workgroup. The proposed workgroups will provide technical guidance to the steering committee on strategies for inclusion in the plan.



Plum Creek East of Luling. Photo by Brian Koch.

We are collecting historical data on water quality in Plum Creek. Review of historical data has demonstrated the need for additional monitoring. Currently, there are three routine sampling stations along Plum Creek, one near Uhland, another southeast of Lockhart, and the third east of Luling. The samples that are collected are tested for parameters such as bacteria, dissolved oxygen, and nutrients. Also, there is flow data collected, and we have used that data to see the correlation of increased flow and bacteria counts.

I also presented an overview of the Plum Creek WPP to the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority Clean Rivers Program (CRP) Steering Committee on March 23. I explained the process, along with timelines and other factors, such as workgroups, outreach and education, and that go with the plan. There was a positive response from the CRP steering committee members on this proactive project.

Also on March 23, at the GBRA coordinated monitoring meeting we proposed three more routine sampling stations, along with seasonal targeted monitoring at 20-30 sites in order to get a better understanding of the bacteria

sources. GBRA liked the idea so we are in the process of submitting it to EPA for approval.

For more information on the Plum Creek Watershed Partnership, please visit <http://pcwp.tamu.edu>.

Plum Creek Watershed Partnership

All Meeting Times 6-8:30 pm

April 10 – Lockhart
Caldwell County Courthouse Annex

April 25 – Kyle
Tobias Elementary

April 26 – Luling
Luling Primary School

Using Cost-Share Programs to Improve Water Quality

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The question of “Who will pay for this?” often arises whenever suggestions of implementing best management practices to enhance water quality on agricultural lands are made. The following briefly describes one possible solution to overcoming the financial burden that can often prevent best management practices from being implemented.

Cost share programs have been an important cornerstone of the local, state, and federal resource conservation effort for decades. These programs provide an incentive for agricultural producers to participate in conservation programs by helping to defray the expense of installing needed conservation practices. Conservation best management practices, if installed and maintained properly by the producer, have the potential to provide noticeable improvement in water quality. In many instances, water quality best management practices provide additional benefits as well. These additional benefits range from reduction of soil loss, protecting future water supplies, protection of groundwater quality, improved air quality, enhanced habitat for wildlife, and economic benefits to the producer as well.

Currently in Texas, several cost share programs are available for agricultural producers. The following provides a brief overview of two of the many cost share programs currently available to agricultural producers in Texas.

TSSWCB Water Quality Management Plan Program

The passage of Texas Senate Bill 503 directed the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board to implement water quality management plans (WQMP) in Texas. The agency has been implementing WQMPs since the mid 1990s and has completed over 6,000 plans in the State of Texas.

A WQMP is a site-specific plan developed through and approved by soil and water conservation districts (SWCD) for agricultural or silvicultural lands. The plan includes appropriate land treatment practices, production practices, management measures, technologies or combinations thereof. The purpose of WQMPs is to achieve a level of pollution prevention or abatement determined by the TSSWCB, in consultation with local soil and water conservation districts, to be consistent with state water quality standards.

After final certification of a WQMP, cooperators may be eligible to apply for cost share to assist in implementing best management practices identified in their site specific WQMP. This year the TSSWCB allocated about \$2,000,000 to SWCDs using state funding through the Senate Bill 503 Program. The 503 Program may fund up to 75% of the costs, with a maximum allocation of \$10,000 per year per cooperator, for certain best management practices. In addition to state 503 funds, funding is also available through the federal Clean Water Act Section 319(h) Grant Program. The U.S. EPA's and the TSSWCB's mutual goal is to ensure that Section 319(h) funds are directed toward effective, high-quality nonpoint source projects that will achieve the best possible results in reducing or abating nonpoint source pollution.

In addition to financial assistance, cooperators with certified WQMPs have the opportunity to utilize technical assistance provided by the five TSSWCB regional field offices located throughout Texas. Technical assistance includes planning, topographic surveying, and engineering design. Cooperators having a certified WQMP may also be granted certain protections if water quality issues arise involving the property covered by the plan. Additional information can be found at

www.tsswcb.state.tx.us/programs/wqmp.html.



TSSWCB Field Office Staff Surveying Erosion Site in Wharton County. Photo by Brian Koch.

NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) was reauthorized in the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Farm Bill) to provide a voluntary conservation program for farmers and ranchers that promotes agricultural production and environmental quality as compatible national goals. EQIP offers financial and technical help to assist eligible participants install or implement structural and management practices on eligible agricultural land.

EQIP works primarily in priority areas where significant natural resource problems exist. In general, priority areas are defined as watersheds, regions, or areas of special environmental sensitivity or having significant soil, water, or related natural resource concerns. These concerns could include soil erosion, water quality and quantity, wildlife habitat, wetlands, and forest and grazing lands. These priority areas are identified through a locally led conservation process.

Eligible persons may apply in the county base program recommended by local county work group or in one of the Statewide Resource Concerns recommended by the State Technical Committee. The base program will vary from county to county depending on the priorities set at the local level. Producers should visit their local USDA Service Center to determine the eligible practices, cost share rates and ranking criteria that will be used in their respective county. Additional information can be found at

<http://www.tx.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/>.

Dickinson Bayou Watershed Needs You

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Mark your calendars and please take time to attend the Dickinson Bayou Watershed Partnership meeting on April 19, 2006. The purpose of the meeting is to get the public's input on the watershed planning process. If you work, play or live in the Dickinson Bayou Watershed your participation is strongly encouraged. The meeting will be from 6:00 – 8:00 pm at the Barber Middle School – Captain's Room in Texas City (2218 Timber Dr., Dickinson, TX).



Dickinson Bayou. Photo by Susan Benner.

The Dickinson Bayou Watershed Partnership itself is composed of stakeholders from state agencies, nonprofits organizations, civic groups, academic institutions, local governments, businesses and industry groups, utilities and citizens from within the watershed. The goal of membership is to be inclusive and comprehensive of the stakeholder entities in the watershed. Directing the Partnership is its Steering Committee. The Partnership Steering Committee is composed of voting representatives of the principal stakeholders groups in the watershed.

Issues that the Watershed Partnership will be tackling are based in part on the draft *2004 Texas Water Quality Inventory and 303(d) List* of impaired waters, which indicates that the above tidal portion of Dickinson Bayou (Segment 1104) is not meeting the contact recreation use due to bacteria. The tidal portion (Segment 1103) fails to meet the contact recreation use due to bacteria and

aquatic life use because water quality testing indicated that concentrations of dissolved oxygen were occasionally lower than optimum for aquatic life. A Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) project is currently underway to address the dissolved oxygen issue.

Ultimately the Dickinson Bayou Watershed Partnership will develop a voluntary consensus based watershed protection plan for the Dickinson Bayou Watershed that will be implemented. Currently the watershed plan will focus on five key categories:

- Habitat
- Water Quality
- Land Use
- Flooding/Stormwater
- Education/Outreach

The watershed plan will also include what the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) describes as the nine key elements of watershed protection plans. Incorporating these elements is crucial since the EPA has developed guidelines that describe the process and criteria to be used to award Clean Water Act (CWA) Section 319 nonpoint source grants which can be used to assist in the implementation of the watershed plan.

For more information regarding the Dickinson Bayou Watershed Partnership please visit www.dickinsonbayou.org or contact Susan Benner at sbenner@tamu.edu or 281-218-6340.

Plan Unveiled to Strengthen Protection for the Gulf of Mexico

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Governors' action plan outlines projects for healthy, resilient coasts.

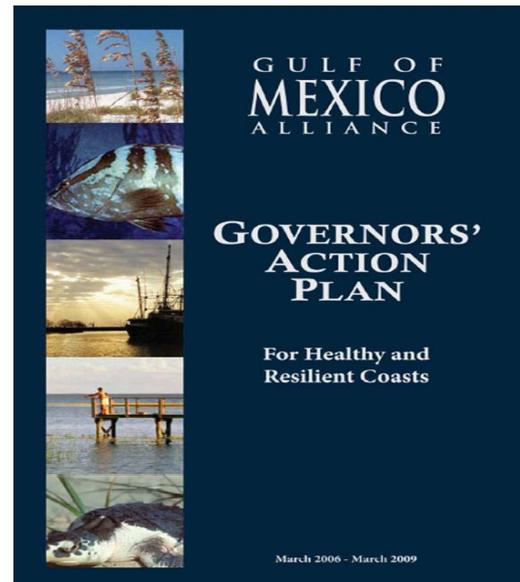
Top environmental officials from the White House and five U.S. Gulf Coast states unveiled a plan to strengthen environmental protection for the Gulf of Mexico as part of a three-day summit meeting in Corpus Christi. The plan furthers the ongoing recovery and rebuilding effort after the devastating effects of the 2005 hurricane season. The *Governors' Action Plan for Healthy and Resilient Coasts* is a framework outlining 11 actions to: improve and protect water quality, restore coastal wetlands and estuarine ecosystems, reduce pollution and nutrient loading, identify gulf habitats to

support coastal management, and expand environmental education.

"These initiatives must begin today to provide for the expected doubling of the Texas coastal population in the next 35 years," says Kathleen Hartnett White, chairman of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and a panel discussion leader at the meeting. "A regional approach addressing human health and safety issues, essential to preserving the gulf, can only be accomplished through partnerships at all levels."

The plan is the result of 12 months of collaboration between the U.S. Gulf States, the Federal Workgroup, interested citizens and numerous other partners. The initiative includes projects designed to produce results in 36 months. This Gulf of Mexico Alliance was formed to develop regional goals and priorities for safeguarding the nation's oceans as outlined in the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy's report—*An Ocean Blueprint for the 21st Century*.

The three-day State of the Gulf of Mexico Summit was hosted by the Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi's Harte Research Institute and Texas Governor Rick Perry. Senior federal, state and local officials from both the United States and Mexico, along with scientific and industry leaders, discussed ways to increase regional collaboration to enhance the environmental and economic health of the Gulf of Mexico. For more information on the alliance or the plan, visit www.gulfofmexicoalliance.org.



The Gulf of Mexico Alliance released the Governors' Action Plan for Healthy and Resilient Coasts on March 28, 2006, at the State of the Gulf of Mexico Summit in Corpus Christi, Texas.

April Water Quality Meetings in South East and South Central Texas

Sabine River Authority Clean Rivers program,
Tuesday, April 18,
10-1:00 p.m. in Orange.

Lower San Antonio River TMDL, Tuesday,
April 18, 6:30-8:30 p.m. in Goliad.

Galveston Bay Council, Wednesday, April 19,
1-4:00 p.m.

Dickinson Bayou WPP, Wednesday, April 19,
6-8 p.m. in Dickinson

Adams and Cow Bayous TMDL,
Tuesday, April 25, 2-5 p.m. in Orange.

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