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Preventive Measures Can Help Protect Plum Creek Watershed

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LOCKHART – Prevention is key to protecting water resources across Texas, particularly in the Plum Creek Watershed, according to officials.

Discussion on ways to protect the watershed will be an important part of the second meeting of the Plum Creek Watershed Partnership scheduled for 6:30 p.m. June 20 at Lockhart State Park.

Residents of Caldwell and Hays counties are encouraged to attend, said Rachel Bauer, Texas Cooperative Extension agent for Caldwell County.

"We're encouraging anyone interested in helping to protect water quality in the watershed to join our team," she said.

The group is developing a Watershed Protection Plan for Plum Creek that will guide efforts to protect and improve water quality, Bauer said.

A 2004 report revealed the Plum Creek Watershed has elevated nutrient concentrations and bacteria levels. A community-led water quality project will address these concerns.

The watershed begins in southeastern Hays County north of Kyle and runs south through Caldwell County, passing near Lockhart and Luling. It then joins the San Marcos River in northern Gonzales County.

"Plum Creek Watershed includes the main stem and all of the tributaries that drain into it, all of which are affected by what happens in the surrounding cities and towns," said Nikki Dictson, Extension water quality specialist. "We're encouraging residents in the area to implement watershed protection methods as part of the plan we're putting together."

In an urban setting, even the simplest activity, such as improper lawn fertilization, can be hazardous to water quality, Dictson said.

"It's important that we have an understanding that many storm drains go directly to streams," Dictson said. "For example, when homeowners fertilize lawns, they should be certain to use the correct rate and type of fertilizer. Over-spread fertilizer that lands on sidewalks or curbs will travel into storm drains that lead directly to streams. This can have adverse effects on fish and other aquatic organisms, and on wildlife that drink and use the water."

Nitrogen and phosphorus – key nutrients in commercial fertilizer that are essential for

plant growth – can pollute water if concentrations get too high, Dictson said.

Pet owners can help prevent this kind of runoff water contamination by removing their pets' waste when visiting parks or walking animals in the neighborhood, she said.

"Pet waste contains both nutrients and bacteria, and can lead to contaminated water," she said.

Malfunctioning septic systems are another major potential source of bacteria and other pathogens, as well as nutrients.

"It's very important to carry out proper maintenance of a septic system," Dictson said. "Have your system inspected regularly. When installing a new system, make sure you have the right type for your location. It's also important to size the system appropriately to fit the needs of the household, and to be certain it can operate efficiently."

Other potential sources of contamination include inadequately treated discharge from wastewater treatment plants, as well as discharges or land application of wastes from other industries or businesses.

In agriculture, preventive measures include ensuring enough vegetative cover is available on rangeland.

"Vegetation covers the surface and acts as a natural filter to trap nutrients and bacteria that might otherwise be transported into a nearby stream," Dictson said.

Providing alternative water sources and adequate shade on rangeland also can reduce the tendency for livestock to congregate in riparian areas adjacent to creeks or streams.

These and other issues will be considered during the planning process, Dictson said. The resulting Watershed Management Plan developed by local citizens will be used as a guide to help improve and protect the quality of water in Plum Creek.

More information on the Plum Creek Watershed Partnership can be found at http://pcwp.tamu.edu . More information on the Texas Watershed Steward program can be found at http://watershedsteward.tamu.edu .

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