



Water pact helps Galveston Bay

City and conservation coalition agree on treated wastewater release

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Houston will set aside a share of the city's treated wastewater for the benefit of Galveston Bay under the terms of a landmark deal announced Tuesday between the city and five conservation groups.

The agreement, which is the first of its kind in Texas, ends years of debate over the fate of the water released from the city's treatment plants and into the streams and bayous that feed the bay. The fight pitted the needs of a growing metropolis against one of the most productive fisheries in the nation.

Under the deal, Houston will release at least 50 percent of its treated wastewater into the bay — unless under order from regulators or the courts to withhold more. The city will pipe its share directly from its treatment plants for municipal and industrial use.

Mayor Annise Parker said the pact essentially secures the city's water supply late into the century without neglecting environmental needs.

"It's a matter of balancing those various needs rather than fighting," Parker said. "We're doing the right thing for the city, and we're doing the right thing for the bay. It's possible to do both things at once."

In return for a permanent source of water for the bay, a coalition led by the Coastal Conservation Association, Galveston Bay Foundation, Galveston Bay Conservation and Preservation Association, National Wildlife Federation and Sierra Club will drop its opposition to the request for water rights by the city.

The groups had protested the city's permit application to state regulators in 2004, saying the diversion of nearly 600,000 acre-feet of water, the capacity of the city's treatment plants, put the bay's health at risk. The city now releases virtually all of its treated waste water, or greywater, into the watershed.

Jim Blackburn, chair of the Galveston Bay Conservation and Preservation Association, said the agreement doesn't guarantee the health of the bay, but "it's an important step."

The deal comes amid talks among regulators, scientists and water suppliers about how much fresh water the bay needs, particularly in times of drought.

Texas law requires some — or all — of river water not already dedicated to thirsty cities, farms and ranches and industrial plants to be set aside for the environment. A change in an estuary's mix of salt and fresh waters could harm an ecosystem teeming with crabs, oysters, shrimp, fish and birds.

At the same time, forecasts show that Greater Houston's demand for water will exceed supply by 35 percent in 2060. To meet the demand, the region will need at least an additional 1.15 million acre-feet per year, according to the state's latest water plan.

For cities across the state, reuse of wastewater is the "ace in the hole" as water becomes more scarce, said Blackburn, who represented the local conservation groups .

That's because treated wastewater is drought-proof, and it's the only source that grows with the population. Reuse of wastewater accounts for 14 percent of new water supply in the state's 2007 water plan.

But reuse also means less water for the environment, said Myron Hess, an attorney and manager of the Texas water program in the Austin office of the National Wildlife Federation.

"Reuse is a good source of water," Hess said, "but this is about finding that right balance. If we don't protect a reasonable amount, then we'll be in trouble."

Under the agreement, the city will not seek to increase its diversion of wastewater at its existing treatment plants. But any effluent produced by future treatment plants is not covered in the pact.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality still must approve the agreement.

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