

LCRA Clean Rivers Program
Mid-Central Basin Water Quality Advisory Committee
Meeting Summary
Jan. 21, 2014
LCRA Redbud Center
Austin, Texas

The meeting began at 1:30 p.m. with 21 stakeholders present. LCRA Clean Rivers Program Coordinator David Cowan began the meeting by welcoming attendees. Each person present then introduced themselves and stated their affiliation.

Cowan began the first presentation by giving an overview of the Clean Rivers Program (CRP) in the Colorado River basin. He explained how the basin has been divided into four different stakeholder regions - Upper, Hill Country, Mid-Central and Lower - and how each region will have a Water Quality Advisory Committee. Each year there will be one meeting held in each region.

Cowan said that a \$67,894 reduction in LCRA's Clean Rivers Program budget for FY 2014-2015 resulted in discontinuing 17 monitoring sites basin-wide. Seven of the discontinued sites were located in the mid-central region. Those sites were located on Clear Creek, Gilleland Creek, Big Sandy Creek, Cedar Creek and Lake Bastrop. Cowan said overall water quality in the region is good, especially when compared to other large basins in the state. However, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) has listed eight waterways in the region as impaired. Clear Creek, which flows into Inks Lake, is impaired for pH, total dissolved solids and sulfates. A graphite mine once operated in the Clear Creek watershed and the remaining tailings have caused water quality degradation when runoff occurs. Bull Creek, Slaughter Creek, and Lake Austin are impaired because of low dissolved oxygen levels, all of which can be attributed to natural causes. Four waterways in the Austin area are impaired for bacteria: Spicewood tributary to Shoal Creek, Walnut Creek, Waller Creek, and Taylor Slough South.

Cowan then introduced Chris Herrington, Manager of the Water Resource Evaluation Section at the City of Austin Watershed Protection Department. Herrington explained the background and process behind the "Improving Austin Streams" initiative, an effort to create an Implementation Plan (I-Plan) and Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) for Spicewood tributary to Shoal Creek, Walnut Creek, Waller Creek, and Taylor Slough South. The TMDL is calculated by the TCEQ and states how much bacteria levels must be reduced in these waterways to meet the Texas Surface Water Quality Standard for contact recreation, he said. Creation of the I-Plan is a separate process that depends on stakeholders to determine who will do what to reduce bacteria. For the "Improving Austin Streams" initiative, both the TMDL and the I-Plan are being developed in parallel. Herrington listed the stakeholders involved with the I-Plan Coordination Committee and highlighted the management measures being used to carry out the plan. The measures include riparian zone restoration, wastewater infrastructure maintenance, domestic pet waste education, resident outreach, and stormwater treatment.

Cowan then introduced Dave Bass, LCRA Water Quality Coordinator. Bass said there has been a dramatic increase in aquatic vegetation growing in the lakes and river during the spring, summer and fall months in recent years. Reasons for the increase include excessive levels of nutrients in the water column, little or no grazing by herbivores and less flushing and scouring due to the lower water flows. Many residents call LCRA to report that they have hydrilla in their nearby waterway, when in fact it could be a number of species that can reach nuisance levels of growth. Bass explained how to identify common aquatic plants throughout the Colorado River basin, including hydrilla, Eurasian watermilfoil, coontail, cabomba, water stargrass, water hyacinth and duckweed. He presented manual and chemical treatment options for these aquatic plants and said an approved treatment proposal is required on public waters. Both the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and LCRA must approve a plan before treatment occurs. LCRA is developing a guidance document for treatment options, Bass said.

Following a short break, Bryan Cook, LCRA Supervisor of Water Quality, was introduced to provide information on how the drought has impacted water quality in the Colorado River basin. Cook began by showing how water flows into the Highland Lakes during 2011, 2012 and 2013 compare to the historical average. Year-end totals show that 2013 was the second lowest year of inflows into the Highland Lakes since the dams were built in the 1940s. The last three years were first-, second- and fifth-lowest yearly inflows in the region's history. Cook showed chlorophyll and transparency data collected from Lake Buchanan from 1984 to present. The data show an increase in chlorophyll (a metric of algae growth and greenness) and a decrease in water clarity. Lake Travis has similar trends, with water clarity showing a downward trend the past 29 years. The drought has also caused an increase in aquatic vegetation, Cook reiterated. Moving water can scour lake and river beds. Less water has moved through the lakes and river than in past years because of the drought. Higher nutrients and less flow in the river downstream of Austin also created an abundance of aquatic vegetation, dominated by the invasive plants hydrilla and water hyacinth. Lastly, Cook highlighted how the drought has impacted Matagorda Bay. He explained how critical flow levels are crucial for maintaining the low-salinity area near the mouth of the Colorado River that provides habitat for oysters, crabs and other estuarine species. Cook presented graphs showing how flows released into the bay from upstream reservoirs helped decrease the salinity levels in the bay. The late October flooding in the Austin area also provided much needed inflows into the bay system, bringing salinity levels back down to desirable levels.

David Meeseey, project specialist at the Texas Water Development Board, was the final presenter of the day. He spoke about Region K water planning and what to expect from the passage of Proposition (Prop) 6. With the approval of Prop 6, \$2 billion will be transferred from the state's "rainy day fund" to the newly created SWIFT fund. An advisory committee and a stakeholder committee will be established to oversee these funds and the uniform standards for regional project prioritization. Meeseey gave an overview of how Prop 6 affects water planning in Region K, and also explained the different categories of funds that will be considered. He highlighted the fact that strategies must be evaluated for their effects on water quality, agriculture, and other natural resources. Meeseey concluded his presentation by inviting any interested persons to attend the regional planning group meetings. The next meeting is planned for April 9th, 2014 at 10 a.m. at the LCRA Dalchau Service Center on Montopolis Drive in Austin.

David Cowan then thanked attendees and presenters for their participation, and said if anyone was interested in staying past the 3:30 p.m. meeting closure time staff and presenters would be happy to answer questions or entertain discussion. Sam Crowther, a Lake Austin shoreline property owner and Colorado River Watch Network volunteer, was curious about the decrease in water clarity that he has been documenting in Lake Austin. It was explained to him that with the decrease in hydrilla coverage in Lake Austin, more nutrients are available to the fast-growing phytoplankton.

At 3:45 p.m. the meeting formally concluded.