

LCRA Clean Rivers Program
Lower Basin Water Quality Advisory Committee
Meeting Summary
Feb. 17, 2015
Wharton Civic Center
Wharton, Texas

Seventeen people were in attendance when the Lower Basin Water Quality Advisory Committee meeting began at 1 p.m. Feb. 17. David Cowan, LCRA Clean Rivers Program coordinator, welcomed everyone and thanked them for coming. He then asked everyone to introduce themselves and state their affiliations.

Cowan began the first presentation with an overview of the Clean Rivers Program in the Colorado River basin and the Water Quality Advisory Committee regions – upper, Hill Country, mid-central and lower. He introduced Robin Cypher, aquatic scientist with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ). Cypher is responsible for assessing water quality in the Colorado River basin. Cypher explained the data assessment cycle and process. The process is for TCEQ to request water quality data; assess the data; allow data providers to review the assessment; allow public comment on the draft report; request TCEQ approval of the draft report; and request Environmental Protection Agency review and approval of the report. The public comment period for the “2014 Draft Integrated Report” ended Feb. 2. TCEQ Commissioners will hear the draft report on June 3. Once TCEQ approves the report, TCEQ will submit it to the EPA for approval.

Cowan then spoke about impaired waters in the lower Colorado River basin. He said there are seven new impairments in the Colorado River basin in the “2014 Draft Integrated Report.” The new listing in the lower basin is Segment 1402, which includes the Colorado River at Wharton. This section of the river is impaired for exceeding bacteria standards. Brian Koch with the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board said before a total maximum daily load (TMDL) or implementation plan is initiated it would be wise to do some reconnaissance of that section of the river to see if the bacteria problem had a simple solution. Koch and Cowan recalled a combined sanitary storm sewer in Wharton that overflowed in years past. Cowan agreed to follow up with the City of Wharton to see if the system was updated.

Steven Johnston, senior environmental planner with the Houston-Galveston Area Council (HGAC), updated the group on the status of Caney Creek and its tributary Linnville Bayou. He said HGAC plans to initiate a TMDL for Caney Creek soon. Funding for the TMDL starts in September. Muriel Tipps, a long-time stakeholder and advocate for Caney Creek, expressed her concern about another discharge permit in the works for Linnville Bayou. She said she didn’t understand why Caney Creek is under HGAC jurisdiction instead of LCRA. Cowan and Johnston explained HGAC’s monitoring crew is closer to Caney Creek than LCRA, so HGAC can be more responsive to pollution complaints and spend less travel time to sample sites. Johnston invited Tipps to participate in the HGAC TMDL meetings taking place in the coming months.

Bryan Cook, LCRA Water Quality supervisor, then presented information on the current state of Matagorda Bay. He said Matagorda Bay is the second largest estuary in Texas. Commercial fisheries in the bay include shrimp, crab and oysters. Recreational fisheries are primarily red drum and speckled trout. The bay's estuaries are a nursery for many species and the timing and magnitude of freshwater inflows are important. Cook described the critical flow refuge, which is important habitat at the mouth of the river, where the goal is to maintain low salinity levels. He explained the criteria needed to release water from the Highland Lakes to augment freshwater flows to the bay. He displayed bay salinity and delta salinity levels for the past year.

The next presenter was Cindy Hobson, a Texas Parks and Wildlife Department biologist, who spoke about seagrass monitoring efforts in Texas. Seagrasses are flowering marine plants found in many Texas bays. They help stabilize sediments, improve water quality, and are important for coastal fisheries by serving as habitat for juvenile shrimp and fish and as a direct food source for many estuarine species. Texas seagrass species include shoal grass, turtle grass, widgeon grass, star grass and manatee grass. Several things threaten the health of seagrass beds in Texas bays, including scarring from boat propellers, also known as "prop scarring." A 2013 regulation protects seagrasses from prop scarring, making it illegal to cause or allow any seagrass plants to be uprooted or dug out from a bay or saltwater bottom by a propeller. Hobson described seagrass monitoring efforts being conducted in collaboration with TCEQ. The program has a goal of further developing and facilitating a coastwide seagrass monitoring program.

Bryan Cook then spoke about a fish-tracking study underway in the lower part of the Colorado River. LCRA, Texas Tech University and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department are conducting the study in a partnership. Guadalupe bass and blue sucker are the key species being studied. The study will collect information about fish habitat, identify key spawning areas and document environmental variables that influence spawning and rearing of young. Fish are collected and fitted with a radio transmitting tag uniquely coded for each fish. The fish movements are recorded with fixed station receivers and the specific locations are identified with a hand-held receiver. During the 2014 sample event, juvenile blue sucker fish were collected for the first time in the Colorado River. This was great news, giving proof that blue suckers are spawning during drought years. Cook showed a video of how the fish are tagged and released back to the river.

Cowan then opened up the floor for a roundtable update and discussion. A discussion about managing runoff from agricultural lands was initiated. Tipps asked if regulatory programs were in place for agricultural stormwater runoff. She said fertilizer prices drive people to look at application rates and, unless it is a confined animal feeding operation, stormwater runoff measures are voluntary. Koch said his department is working with farmers and ranchers to install best management practices on their lands, but the measures are indeed voluntary.

The meeting formally concluded at 3:05 p.m.