

# Will vehicles be rollin' in the Nueces River?

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(Delcia Lopez/Express-News)

Don Lindenborn opposes driving in the Nueces. Tire marks can be seen where people do it anyway.

La PRYOR — Standing on the banks of the Nueces River watching bass meander through the crystal clear water, it's not hard to understand why people want better access to the waterway.

But Zavala County's plans to improve access by letting vehicles drive up and down the riverbed has some landowners and environmentalists readying for a fight.

The proposal, which the county forwarded to the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department, would open up a 13-mile stretch of the river to vehicles. It marks the first major attempt to do so since the Legislature banned the practice of tooling up and down the state's rivers, with the exception of two in the Panhandle, in 2003.

"I just think it's insanity," said spinach farmer Dondee Lindenborn, who owns property on the Nueces. "I just can't believe they're considering it."

Those pushing the plan insist it's about fair access to the river, saying it's often difficult for people to reach their favorite swimming holes without a long and grueling hike down the riverbank.

"It's to give older people or handicapped people a way to get to their swimming hole or fishing hole," said La Pryor resident Ricardo Lopez, who worked on the plan. "It's basically for the families."

Lindenborn and Sky Lewey of the Nueces River Authority don't believe it's families who would be the main beneficiaries of reopening the river to vehicles. Their memory of the years before 2003 involves four-wheel-drive vehicles tearing up and down the Nueces in large numbers.

To back the claim, Lewey produces several old printouts from the four-wheeling clubs' Web sites extolling the virtues of "running the Nueces," with picture after picture of vehicles doing just that.

She said many still do it illegally, pointing to the abundance of vehicle tracks on the wide plains of bare rock that flank the river in spots. The practice can wreak havoc on the river's ecosystem, said Lewey, who laughs at the notion that the banks are supposed to be as flat and bare as they are in spots.

"That's about as far from natural structure as you can get, short of putting a bulldozer to it," she said.

Lewey believes the four-wheelers would quickly return en masse if the plan passes and said there has been an uptick of activity recently since word got out that the practice might be legalized.

Zavala County Judge Joe Luna insists the intent of the effort has nothing to do with four-wheeling and that the plan doesn't allow the activity.

The plan limits tire heights to 38 inches, steers vehicles to rock and gravel bars, limits their speed to 15 mph and allows driving in the river itself only to cross it.

"These people have never been about (four-wheeling)," Luna said. "I think they made that pretty clear."

The ultimate decision is up to Parks & Wildlife. The legislation that banned the practice in 2003 left to local governments the ability to open up parts of rivers to vehicles with the agency's permission.



(Delcia Lopez/Express-News)

The Nueces River has a bed of natural gravel.

Melissa Parker, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department river conservation coordinator, said the state has approved two plans since closing the river, but, unlike this one, both were very small in scope and aimed at a single spot.

"The difficult thing about a linear plan is that you are either driving in a streambed or you are driving on private property," she said. "The riparian habitat is very sensitive and essential to the health of a stream."

Rumors were flying Thursday that the agency already had rejected the proposal, but Deputy Executive Director Scott Boruff denied that and said he probably wouldn't make a decision until next week.

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