

National Wildlife Federation

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Conservationists Urge Lawmakers to Protect Streams and Estuaries NWF lays out options for safeguarding critical "environmental flows"

AUSTIN, TX - In testimony before the Texas Legislature's Joint Interim Committee on Water Resources, Myron Hess, legal counsel for the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) today told lawmakers the state needs to take action to ensure a sufficient flow of water in its rivers, streams and coastal bays.

"As Texas' population grows and as water demands increase, we're leaning more and more heavily on our natural water sources-our rivers and streams and aquifers," Hess said. "In the process, we're losing sight of the fact that Mother Nature needs water too." Hess urged lawmakers to provide strong protections for "environmental flows" - the amount of water needed in rivers and streams and estuaries to support fish and wildlife populations.

Along with their environmental significance, Hess noted the importance of environmental flows to rural and coastal economies.

Hess encouraged committee members to act sooner rather than later. "Right now some of our rivers and streams are still flowing only because people holding rights to the water are not fully exercising those rights," Hess said. "As the state's demand for water increases, that situation will change. We need to protect these flows now rather than forcing the next generation to restore them later."

The federal government and the state of Florida are together spending billions to restore sections of the Everglades, which have been damaged by decades of poorly planned water development.

Other conservationists have joined NWF in calling for more robust protection of environmental flows in Texas. Ken Kramer, Executive Director of the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club has noted that the lack of protection for flows has already taken its toll on one Texas river.

"Last year we all witnessed the spectacle of the once mighty Rio Grande petering out behind a sandbar instead of flowing into the Gulf of Mexico," Kramer said. "If we don't take proactive steps now, before increased demand overwhelms us, that particular catastrophe will simply be a sign of things to come. Instead, let's make it a wake-up call."

Prior to 1985, the State of Texas issued water rights permits without any consideration of environmental flow. Since then, potential flow impact has been taken into consideration on a case-by-case basis when issuing new permits and when issuing certain permit amendments. Hess said that approach is simply not sufficient and that too many water rights permits have been issued without protections already.

"Just agreeing to stop ignoring such a critical factor 'from now on' overlooks how grave the situation has already become," Hess said.

The nation's largest member-supported conservation education and advocacy group, the National Wildlife Federation unites people from all walks of life to protect nature, wildlife and the world we all share. The Federation has educated and inspired families to uphold America's conservation tradition since 1936.