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SURVEY: Texans Want Protection for Rivers, Bays and Estuaries.

Poll shows overwhelming support for water rights permits to protect fish and wildlife.

(Austin, TX) - Texas voters want state leaders to keep Texas rivers flowing, according to a recent statewide poll, even if that means limiting diversions for other uses. Texans also want the state to protect coastal bays and estuaries by making sure they get enough water from upstream to stay healthy and productive. The poll, conducted March 11-14, 2003, was commissioned by the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) and conducted by The Tarrance Group, Inc.

"The people of Texas understand that maintaining flowing rivers and healthy bays and estuaries is vital to the state's economic and social well-being," said Susan Kaderka, director of NWF's office in Austin. "These waterways are the lifeblood of our Texas landscape, and the public expects its leaders to protect them for future generations. And they accept the need to use water more efficiently in order to help make that happen," added Kaderka.

On an issue of particular relevance currently, an overwhelming majority of Texans polled indicated strong support for the granting of water rights for the specific purpose of keeping water in our rivers for fish, wildlife and human recreation. On Wednesday, March 19, 2003, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) will be considering an application for just such a permit.

The TCEQ Commissioners must decide whether to follow the normal permit process for an application filed by the San Marcos River Foundation to protect flows in the San Marcos and Guadalupe rivers and into San Antonio Bay. A favorable decision on Wednesday would merely keep the application under active consideration, with any final determination a year or more away.

The application is opposed by a variety of water development interests. Lt. Governor Dewhurst recently asked the agency to halt its consideration of the application until the Legislature has had a chance to consider the issue during the pending legislative session. Several additional permit applications, for environmental flow protection in other areas of the state also are pending before TCEQ. However, they are all in a much earlier stage of consideration.

Among the key findings of the Poll:

- Eighty-eight percent of Texas voters “agree with the state granting a water permit to protect river flows for fish, wildlife and recreation.”
- Seventy-three percent said that it is "extremely" or "very" important to them personally “that the state allocate water usage permits in a way that ensures a certain amount of water is kept in the rivers to help prevent them from drying up.”
- Sixty-eight percent felt it “extremely” or "very" important that “enough water stays in the rivers and streams to provide bays and estuaries the freshwater flow they need.”

When asked if it was acceptable to dry up rivers to meet water needs, seventy-four percent said “we need to find a way for people to use less water so we can keep our rivers and streams from going dry.” Only twenty percent said that people need the water and drying up rivers and streams was “sometimes...a necessary price of growth.”

Myron Hess, Legal Counsel in NWF’s Austin office, said "the poll demonstrates the need for policy makers in the State to catch up with the wishes of ordinary Texans to make sure our rivers and bays are protected. Water diversions have been allowed to dry up rivers in some parts of the country. These poll results show clearly that Texans don't want that to become the future for Texas rivers and Texas bays."

“The people of Texas clearly do not see the issue of water as one of people versus wildlife and the environment,” Hess said. “They want a balanced approach that protects both and they acknowledge the need to use water more efficiently to make that happen.”

Hess also noted “NWF does not expect the TCEQ Commissioners to make decisions based on the results of a poll. However, one of the key issues they must ultimately consider is whether issuing the permit is in the public interest. Obviously, the poll demonstrates the public is very much in favor of protecting our rivers and our bays and estuaries.”

The poll was conducted March 11-14 2003 and surveyed 800 registered Texas voters.

The National Wildlife Federation is the nation's largest member supported conservation advocacy and education organization.