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Reservoir battle changes stages
Bill would affect Marvin Nichols plans

By JIMMY ISAAC

Thursday, June 21, 2007

MOUNT PLEASANT — A Senate bill has been approved and awaits the governor's signature, but some members of the Northeast Texas Water Planning Group vow to continue their fight against at least one reservoir proposed in the bill.

The bill designates 19 future reservoir sites throughout Texas as part of the statewide water plan for future needs.

The group met Wednesday in Mount Pleasant and determined parameters for selecting three representatives to serve on a commission alongside three Dallas-area representatives. The commission will study strategies for addressing water needs in both regions, which have been at odds over Marvin Nichols Reservoir, a proposed 75,000-acre lake along the Sulphur River basin between Mount Pleasant, Mount Vernon and Clarksville. Construction of Marvin Nichols is not projected for about two decades.

Attending the meeting were more than 130 landowners opposed to the reservoir and business and local elected officials who support its construction for economic development.

Gov. Rick Perry postponed signing the bill Tuesday in consideration of massive flooding in North Texas, according to Walt Sears, executive

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director of the Northeast Texas Municipal Water District, which is an administrator for the planning group.

The legislation allows Northeast Texas the right to appropriate 20 percent of the water from the reservoir. If the Dallas area retains rights to a majority of the reservoir's water, then that region will pay for the entire cost of construction as well as maintenance and operation costs throughout construction.

The new law also regulates environmental flows to ensure enough water moves downstream to protect streams, bays and estuaries, and also implements a statewide water conservation program.

Nominations from the planning group for who will serve on the study commission will be accepted for 45 days, the group decided. A final decision will be made at an Aug. 15 meeting.

"Eventually, this reservoir will be built. It can be built with us or without us," said Ann Rushing, mayor of Clarksville and vice-president of the Northeast Texas Water Coalition, a six-month-old group of elected officials and business leaders throughout the region who support the reservoir's construction.

The coalition asked that the planning group select commission members who are not all adamant in opposition to the reservoir.

Added Mount Pleasant Mayor Jerry Boatner to the planning group, "While many oppose the lake, when it becomes reality, we need someone to work for East Texas."

Opponents say there are other options for providing water to meet Dallas' growing needs, but Mike Rickman, with a similar water planning group in Dallas, says other future sources are also being considered. For every three gallons of water Dallas would receive from future reservoir sites, four gallons would come from new conservation measures there, he said.

"Obviously, we have consumers who are concerned about the cost (of constructing Marvin Nichols) just as much as this region," Rickman said. "The strategies that were chosen were chosen primarily because of cost."

International Paper gets more than one third of the wood fiber it needs for production at its Texarkana Mill from the hardwood forest of the Sulphur River basin that would become either under water or untouchable because of federal mitigation and wildlife requirements, according to Doug Wadley, the mill's environmental services manager.

Further, a new dam would lower levels downstream to Lake Wright Patman, from which the mill draws water for production.

The mill boasts a \$70 million payroll to more than 800 employees, but the reservoir and federal mitigation of surrounding bottomlands would result in the loss of more than one-quarter million areas of hardwood forests where wood fiber is gathered for mill production, he said.

"Not only would we not have the water for use, but our costs for materials would skyrocket," Wadley said. "Building this thing puts a high probability of putting us out of business."

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