

11.0 OTHER WATER-RELATED ISSUES

11.1 Recreation, Tourism and Economic Development

Water related development is important for the future growth of the Sabine Basin economies. Water is needed to support municipal growth, provide power, and promote industrial development. In addition, water projects themselves can generate growth. These projects provide recreational opportunities that generate tourism and support industries. Eco-tourism, tourism associated with nature activities, is a potential means for economic growth in the region.

In the Sabine Basin, existing reservoirs support significant numbers of recreational activities and facilities. Numerous public and private recreational facilities have been developed on the banks of these reservoirs including boat ramps and docks, camping and picnic sites, and commercial support services. Several lakes have been constructed in the Basin primarily to provide recreational opportunities. They include Lake Cherokee, Lake Gladewater and the Wood County lakes. These lakes are operated to preserve water front use for surrounding property owners and visitors. Generally, most other reservoirs are operated to meet the primary function of each reservoir (water supply, power supply, flood control), but consideration is also given to maximizing recreational opportunities in the watershed.

Visitors spending time at recreational facilities in the Sabine Basin add revenue to the local economy in many ways. In 1997 leisure travel in the Sabine Basin generated approximately \$450 million. Much of this is attributed to eco-tourism. Currently, the centerpiece of the Basin's water recreation is sport fishing. The numerous reservoirs, tributaries and streams offer many opportunities for anglers. Lake Fork Reservoir is perhaps the most famous for the Florida largemouth bass that have been stocked there since 1978. Lake Tawakoni has traditionally been known as one of the top Texas reservoirs for catfish, and Toledo Bend offers numerous species, including crappie, catfish and bass. Economically, the total direct expenditures made by Lake Fork anglers in 1995 were more than \$27 million. Another popular recreation activity in the Sabine River Basin is hunting. There are also several state and local parks, hiking trails, and campgrounds throughout in the Basin. The Sabine National Forest in Southeast Texas contains more than 150,000 acres around the Toledo Bend Reservoir.

The Sabine Basin already attracts thousands of visitors a year, but with additional facilities the tourism industry could grow significantly. This is possible through a coordinated

approach to a recreation-based economic development program. It will require local area leaders, along with SRA support, to identify potential growth areas and constraints, develop local and Basin-wide attraction and service goals, and develop an advertising program to promote the diverse activities within the Basin.

However, this program must be coupled with education and information on the natural cycles of reservoir management. SRA's primary responsibility is to provide water to the Basin's citizens. Operation of water supply reservoirs will include fluctuations of water levels. During drought conditions lake elevations may drop to levels that do not support recreational facilities. This must not be over-looked when pursuing water resource based economic development activities. In addition, local communities must be aware that there are economic and social costs inherent in any type of new development. Increased usage of existing facilities means additional competition for facilities, higher density usage and perhaps increased costs to local users. Keeping these issues in mind, there are opportunities to increase the economic benefits from development of the Basin's natural resources. The SRA can encourage this type of development in several ways.

- Provide leadership and technical assistance for regional efforts to develop recreation, or eco-tourism programs in the Basin. The SRA can assemble regional interests and encourage the development of a regional recreation plan and regional and national advertisement of available amenities and events.
- Encourage local involvement with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and USDA Forest Service on programs expanding eco-tourism in Texas such as the Texas Coastal Bird Trail, the Scenic Rivers program, Wildlife Management Areas and several fishing programs.
- Improve public access to selected reservoirs and recreation sites. Roadway improvements and waterside parks, picnic grounds and fishing piers, as noted in a regional recreation plan, could be developed in conjunction with other public and private entities.
- Improve boat access at selected reservoirs. The Authority can supplement existing boat ramps in conjunction with recreation planning.
- Provide financial assistance for improvements to amenities in the Basin.

11.2 Flood Control

With the increasing urbanization of the Sabine Basin, future needs for flood control impoundment may become necessary. Currently, SRA does not own or operate any projects specifically constructed for flood control. Two proposed reservoirs, Big Sandy and Carl Estes, were authorized for flood control and water conservation under the Flood Control Act of 1970. However, neither of these reservoirs has been constructed. The existing flood control projects within the Basin are the four Wood County lakes: Lakes Quitman, Winnsboro, Hawkins and Holbrook.

SRA supports local flood control management through research and reservoir operations. A study of recent flood events in Newton and Orange counties was completed in 1992, and an evaluation of the Toledo Bend spillway gate operations to control flooding in the Lower Basin was completed in 1994. These studies provide information necessary to administer floodplain management to reduce the impact of flooding on local communities. SRA also provides flood plain management through monitoring weather, river and lake conditions, assessing potential flood events and notifying Basin residents. The Alert System, which was installed in 1993, provides real-time information to SRA staff for downstream flood management.

11.3 Environmental Flows

The State of Texas is actively pursuing development of methods to define necessary streamflow and estuary inflow to protect the environmental conditions of its river and lakes system. To date, no site-specific stream flow assessments have been conducted in the Sabine Basin. However, pending the final recommendations for environmental flows, the TNRCC has established default values for instream flows that would apply to the Sabine River. As currently defined, the default environmental criteria do not apply to existing reservoirs. Therefore, existing supply yields within Lake Fork, Lake Tawakoni, Toledo Bend Reservoir, and other water supply reservoirs will not be affected by these criteria. Future river diversions will however be affected by these criteria. Also, any future reservoir project and most future proposed tributary diversions will be subject to maintaining some minimum quantity of flow defined as needed for maintaining environmental habitats.

11.4 Navigation

Navigable waters are those waters subject to tidal influences and/or are presently used, have been used in the past, or may be used in the future for interstate or foreign commerce. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE) considers the Sabine River a navigable waterway from Sabine Lake to the confluence with Big Sandy Creek. Currently commercial navigation in the Sabine Basin is limited to the Lower Sabine River from Sabine Lake to the Port of Orange. The COE, who is responsible for maintaining federally designated commercial waterways, operates river and harbor dredging projects in this portion of the Basin to ensure required operating depths. Navigational charts for the Gulf Coast, Sabine Lake and Lower Sabine River are available through NOAA.

Current navigation in the Basin should not be impacted by proposed water supply projects. However, consideration of “navigable waters” is needed during the planning process. Interstate navigable waters are subject to the Rivers and Harbors Act of 1899, which does not allow the construction of an obstruction within the waterway without Congressional approval. Also, construction within any waters of the United States will require a 404 permit. These permitting issues are further discussed in Section 10.