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2 conservation groups propose 'National Scenic River' designation for Neches River

If approved, Neches River could not be dammed or impeded

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PHOTO: ADRIAN VAN DELLEN The Neches River, a portion of which is pictured here, is currently part of a proposal to be named a National Scenic River. If accepted, the designation will preserve the river in its free-flowing condition and ensure it will not be dammed or otherwise impeded.

The Neches River Refuge could receive its lifeline from a title.

A new initiative proposed by members of the Texas Conservation Alliance and the Friends of the Neches River would, if accepted, designate the river as a National Scenic River.

The designation, part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, protects rivers in the United States from development that would substantially change their wild or scenic nature. The act may designate entire rivers and/or sections of rivers to be preserved in their free-flowing condition and ensures that they are not dammed or otherwise impeded.

"It (designation) has to be proposed to Congress through a study bill," said Dr. Michael Banks, co-chair of Friends of the Neches River. "A congressman with the river in their district would have to make a study bill to be presented before congress."

U.S. Congressman Jeb Hensarling of Texas' fifth congressional district, the district which contains the Neches, would have to present the bill. Dr. Banks said that the congressman is currently examining the proposal.

After the study bill, the United States Forest Service and the U.S. Parks Service would initiate a study, which would involve examining the value of the river to the area. After the study, the actual bill for designation would have to be proposed and voted on in Congress. The entire process would take 2-3 years. This act would also protect the Neches River Refuge, formally requested in 2006 by Dale Hall of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In January 2007, the City of Dallas and the state Water Development Board sought to block creation of the refuge in order to build Lake Fastrill, a proposed reservoir that would provide drinking water to Dallas.

On June 30, 2008, Dallas State District Judge Jorge Solis ruled in favor of the USFWS. The WDB and the City of Dallas are appealing the decision. The appeal will be heard in January.

"The key issue for East Texas (in this proposal) is that if the water were dammed, it would be taken directly to the Metroplex," said Janice Bezanson, executive director of the Texas Conservation Alliance. "In this area, the river itself and the aquatic habitat is most important. Damming the river would reduce the flow of the river with no benefit for East Texas."

There are currently 166 National Wild and Scenic Rivers in 38 states and Puerto Rico, but only one in the state of Texas: a 30-mile section of the Rio Grande. The designation would give the state a second Wild and Scenic River as well as protect various interests in and around the Neches.

"Receiving this designation would protect the river from physical change and also protects the cultural and historical aspects - our heritage with the Neches," Dr. Banks said. "It would also bring more notoriety to the river, which would boost the economy in and around the Neches."

The designation would also work hand in hand with the Neches River Refuge.

"Having the Neches designated as a National Scenic River would be a nice compliment to the Refuge," Ms. Bezanson said. "It's very important for the surrounding wildlife as well as several industries, such as timber, hunting and fishing. Damming the river would be hard on the local economy, the people and the river's environment."

Dr. Banks said that the designation would not change day-to-day life and business around the Neches.

"All of this would happen with minimal government involvement," he said. "People who own land (around the Neches) could continue to do the same things after the designation as long as they respected the guidelines, such as streamside management."