

# As Dallas stands by site for reservoir, report touts other locations for refuge

## Dallas wants land for reservoir; groups say water needs overblown

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service could build a bigger and better wildlife refuge if it chose a different site than the one Dallas has long eyed for the Fastrill Reservoir, according to a new report prepared for the city.



The report comes amid a yearlong federal lawsuit between the city and the federal government over a proposed wildlife refuge on the Neches River in East Texas.

Supporters of the refuge say the 25,000-acre site is one of the last bottomland hardwood forests left in Texas and an "interstate highway" for migrating ducks. City officials say the site is critical if the Dallas-Fort Worth area wants to have water beyond 2060.

"What the city has tried to say to the Fish and Wildlife Service is, 'Look, you can have both; you can have a reservoir, and you can have your refuge,'" S. Cass Weiland, an attorney representing the city, said Thursday. "If they had considered these other opportunities that existed out there, we might not be where we are."

A Fish and Wildlife spokesman said he couldn't comment because of the pending lawsuit. But reservoir opponents dismissed the report's findings and said the issue of the site was settled years ago.

"This report was commissioned by people who want to build Fastrill Reservoir," said Janice Bezanson of the Texas Conservation Alliance. "I'm extremely skeptical that this site is better ... because the Fish and Wildlife Service has been looking at these sites since the 1980s, and they have chosen the best site."

But the city argues that the information used in the agency's 1985 study is outdated and no longer accurately represents the area.

Officials with the city and the Upper Neches River Municipal Water Authority met with the Fish and Wildlife director in April 2006, asking the agency to withhold approval of the site until the city had a chance to conduct a study and offer alternatives.

But the agency announced its plans for the site two months later, and the city sued in January. HDR Engineering completed its study for the city and water authority last month.

The study found that two other sites downstream have more than 2 1/2 times the acres of bottomland hardwoods and more land overall than the site for the proposed refuge. The report also noted that bottomland hardwoods at Fish and Wildlife's proposed site are far less dense than when assessed in 1985.

It's unclear what impact the study will have on the lawsuit or whether it will even be considered in the case. The Fish and Wildlife Service agreed last week to hold off on establishing the refuge until the end of April as the lawsuit progresses.

The fight has bred sore feelings in the area between Palestine and Rusk, Texas, where some residents say Dallas is stealing water to fill its pools and pretty up its lawns.

"I can't go out in town out in public without people saying, 'How's the river going?' " said Michael Banks, head of Friends of the Neches River. "People are very aware that Dallas wants to come take our water and destroy our natural resources."

Environmental groups say the city's reservoir needs are overblown and there is plenty of available water in existing reservoirs.

But using that water would be far more expensive when you consider the costs of treating and transporting it, said Assistant City Manager Ramon Miguez. The farther out the city goes, the lower the elevation. That means the water would have to be pumped uphill.

Fastrill is at a higher elevation and would produce about 100 million gallons of water a day.

"We have looked under every single rock," Mr. Miguez said. "The basins within close proximity have been tapped out. We are extracting pretty much all the water we can get from the rivers that are near us."