

Neches River advocate says he is 'ecstatic' about ruling that protects planned wildlife refuge in East Texas

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A local Neches River advocate said Friday he was "ecstatic" about a federal appeals court's decision in favor of protecting a planned national wildlife refuge from Dallas officials who hope to turn much of the East Texas tract into a lake.

Now only the U.S. Supreme Court can overturn the refuge in favor of the reservoir, said Richard Donovan of Lufkin.

"For now we're feeling pretty good," he said. "You have to take these victories as you get them. I'm pretty ecstatic about it, I guess you could say. I think this is a great victory not only for East Texas, but for all Texans."

The ruling by the New Orleans-based 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals' filed Thursday affirmed a lower court's finding in support of the proposed wildlife refuge along the Neches River, the Associated Press stated in a story Friday. The city of Dallas and the Texas Water Development Board claimed in a lawsuit that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service established the 25,000-acre refuge in 2006 without first considering environmental and economic impacts, the AP story stated.

Donovan said the planned refuge, in Anderson and Cherokee counties, is important to East Texas for several reasons, including its ability to act as "a wildlife incubator."

"Birds and animals will migrate into Angelina County and all parts of Texas," he said.

The refuge also will serve as a laboratory of sorts, a place where classes - including many from Dallas - can go to study vegetation and wildlife, Donovan said.

"East Texas and Texas are becoming more metropolitan," he said. "We're going to have fewer and fewer of these places available. I think tourism is going to be drawn to that in a lot larger numbers than people can imagine. It will have trails and be open to the public."

The lawsuit claimed the wildlife service violated federal law by not addressing the refuge's effects on Dallas' water supply, economy and future water planning, the AP story stated. The reservoir was not scheduled to be built until 2050.

The refuge represents much more than the water issue, Donovan said.

"That site was chosen (by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) because it possesses some of the finest hardwood habitat left in the entire United States," he said. "And hardwood habitat is crucial to many forms of wildlife."

Donovan, author of the book "Paddling the Wild Neches," said the next big step for advocates of the 400-mile corridor is the designation of the Neches as a National Wild and Scenic River. That would keep the river in its free-flowing state, precluding the government from issuing permits for projects that would dam the river, according to a recent Texas Conservation Alliance press release.