

## Judge rules for Neches refuge; Dallas appeals

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A federal judge's decision in favor of the Neches River National Wildlife Refuge could put Angelina County closer to an expected resulting tourism increase, officials say.

"The impact it would have locally would be tremendous because of the increased tourism potential not only for Neches River, but for the entire area," said Julie Shackelford, programs director for Conservation Fund Texas, based in Nacogdoches.



Photo courtesy of Adrian Van Dellen

The Neches River National Wildlife Refuge remains protected from losing water rights at the Fastrill Reservoir to Dallas and the Texas Water Development Board in a decision by a federal judge on Monday.

A Dallas U.S. district judge denied motions Monday by the City of Dallas and Texas Water Development Board seeking to acquire water rights to the Fastrill Reservoir in the refuge area. The reservoir, the parties have argued, would be needed in 50 years to supply water to Dallas. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which created the refuge in 2006, has said the reservoir proposed for the site is one of many water supply options available to Dallas Water Utilities.

As of Tuesday afternoon, the City of Dallas had filed an emergency motion for injunction, pending appeal. It was unclear how that could effect the recent decision.

The judge's decision is not only a victory for the refuge creator, but also for non-profit and advocacy groups supporting protection of the refuge.

"This is wonderful news!" said **Janice Bezanson**, executive director of **Texas Conservation Alliance**, in a press release. "The Neches River Refuge is one of the most important wildlife areas left in Texas. Tens of thousands of Texans wrote letters or signed petitions in support of its creation."

The refuge area includes a designated 25,000-acre wildlife footprint with its boundaries focused on the bottom lands of the Neches River in Cherokee and Anderson counties. So far more than 6,700 acres have been acquired by the Conservation Fund — a national non-profit organization that facilitates land transactions based on eco-tourism.

Acquiring land for the refuge has been delayed by the Fish and Wildlife Service pending the outcome of the lawsuit. Conservationists are poised to donate several thousand acres to the refuge as soon as the litigation is resolved, according to the Alliance. Acquisition of the remaining land will not be forced, officials said.

"Unlike the proposed reservoir, land will be acquired for the refuge only from willing sellers," according to an Alliance press release. "No landowner will be pressured to sell land to the refuge."

