



## Neches on list of most endangered rivers

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Gina Donovan has fond childhood memories of canoeing, fishing and camping on and around the Neches River.

"It was a spectacular part of my life," the 41-year-old Diboll native and Texas Committee on Natural Resources member said of her childhood experiences. "I just hope generations to come have the same opportunity to enjoy the river."

However, while a Neches River reservoir slated for 2045 might be decades away, the project already is causing a stir among nature conservationists locally and nationwide.

American Rivers, a nonprofit, national organization designed to protect and promote rivers, this week ranked the Neches River No. 6 on its annual list of the nation's Ten Most Endangered Rivers. The reservoir, known as the Fastrill, is the chief reason, said Rebecca Wodder, organization president.

Fastrill is part of the city of Dallas' long-range water plans. It is projected to help meet the water demands for 2060.

"Fastrill's folly would alter the face of one the most unique rivers in the United States," Wodder said. "The Neches is home to some of the nation's last great bottomland hardwood forests and more than 100 different plant and animal species."

Wildlife experts say Fastrill would affect the local ecosystem, including Big Thicket National Preserve, which is already on the National Parks Conservation Association's list of America's Most Endangered Parks.

### 10 most endangered rivers:

1. Santa Fe River, N.M.
2. San Mateo Creek, Calif.
3. Iowa River, Iowa
4. Upper Delaware River, N.Y.
5. White Salmon River, Wash.
6. Neches River, Texas
7. Kinnickinnic River, Wis.
8. Neuse River, N.C.
9. Lee Creek, Ark., Okla.
10. Chuitna River, Ala.

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"Most of the people up in Dallas are not concerned about where their water comes from," said Terry Stelly, ecosystem biologist for Texas Parks and Wildlife Department Coastal Fisheries Division. "They just turn on the tap and it's there, but they need to think about it. The reservoir would change the whole scheme of wildlife in the area."

Stelly added that building the reservoir would displace many animals from their natural habitat.

Richard Harrel, professor of biology at Lamar University, said the reservoir will disturb the natural order for river organisms.

"Changing the flow regime will change the water quality and the conditions that exist," he said.

Harrel said water shortages could be expected in Southeast Texas.

"They will be taking water out of our water shed," he said. "It would be more likely that we could have water shortages here."

The release of the America's Rivers list added fuel to an ongoing fight that pits nature conservationists vs. the City of Dallas and the Texas Water Development Board.

In June 2006, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service approved plans for a new 25,000 wildlife refuge along the north Neches River, in Cherokee and Anderson counties. Environmentalists hoped it would signal the end of the Fastrill project but in January 2007, the Texas Water Development Board and the City of Dallas filed separate suits against the U.S. Department of the Interior, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, seeking to strike down the creation of the wildlife refuge.

Carla Daws, a spokeswoman for the Texas Water Development Board, declined to comment about the American Rivers list because of "the pending litigation."

Engineers have been eyeing Fastrill as a potential reservoir site since 1961.

In 2001, the East Texas (Region I) Regional Water Plan identified Fastrill as containing desirable characteristics and in 2005, it was adopted as a strategy by the Dallas City Council.

Construction is expected to begin in 2036 at an estimated cost of \$569 million, according to the Texas Water Development Board.

Fastrill opponents have said that Dallas isn't doing enough to conserve water, but Yvonne Dupré, program coordinator with the Dallas Water Utilities Conservation Division, said the city has stepped up conservation efforts considerably since 2001.

"A few years ago, that criticism was valid, but that is no longer the case," Dupré said. "We do take conservation seriously, and the citizens of Dallas are taking steps to save water."

Dupré said that conservation alone won't solve the city's water woes.

"As the population grows, even with conservation, we don't think we'll have enough water," she said.

In 2001, Donovan and her father, Richard, paddled more than 200 miles down the Neches to put a spotlight on the river. At night, they camped out on sandbars. Today, Gina and Richard and the rest of the Donovan family continue to fight to preserve the Neches.

"We saw the most beautiful landscapes - red fox, gators and deer," she recalled. "During the night, I was exhausted, but I could hardly sleep because the sky was so beautiful. It was phenomenal, almost spiritual."

The bottomland hardwood forests, however, remain the top concern for most conservationists.

"There is no amount of mitigation that could replace the bottomland hardwood forests," Stelly said. "Once they're gone, they're gone."

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