

## Group Seeks National Recognition For Neches River

By KELLY GOOCH, Staff Writer

The Texas Conservation Alliance is participating in an initiative to help get the Neches River designated as a National Scenic River.



A scene along the Neches River.

The 400-mile river starts in Van Zandt County, north of Interstate 20, and empties into Sabine Lake at the Gulf of Mexico.

Richard Donovan, director of the Texas Conservation Alliance, said they want the river to be recognized and protected as a National Scenic River because it is historic and one of the last wild rivers left in Texas.

The Neches River was one of the first places Anglo settlers came in Texas, he said.

“It was rich in game,” Donovan said. “It was almost a Garden of Eden in a way.”

He said the nonprofit organization American Rivers added the Neches River to its 2007 list of the 10 most endangered rivers in the nation, and new dams have been proposed for the river.

Proposed dams would be built on the upper Neches and on the middle of the river where U.S. Highway 69 crosses it, Donovan said.

Also, he said an existing dam may be raised by as much as 12 feet.

Donovan said the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service designated a national wildlife refuge last year where the city of Dallas wanted to build a dam.

There is a lawsuit filed by the city of Dallas and the Texas Water Development Board against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Department of the Interior. The latter two allege the wildlife service did not respect North Texas and its water needs when it declared the Neches a national wildlife refuge.

Janice Bezanson, executive director of the Texas Conservation Alliance, said a federal judge ruled in favor of the fish and wildlife service, the city of Dallas appealed the decision to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals and the fish and wildlife service is waiting for the result of that appeal. Arguments are expected early next year, she said.

Donovan said if the Neches is protected as a National Scenic River, there is opportunity to develop a tourism and retirement industry along the river. However, if it is not protected and the dams are built, the surrounding wildlife is in danger, Donovan said.

Right now, he said deer, squirrels, bobcats, raccoons, beavers and otters are among the creatures inhabiting the area.

Donovan also said the Neches serves as part of the central “flyway” for birds migrating to South America. “It provides food, shelter and cover for them,” he said.

Donovan said the building of the dams would also result in more than 100,000 acres of condemned land.

He said with the initiative, the Texas Conservation Alliance is trying to communicate to the public that the Neches is both a natural resource for East Texas and is a potential economic resource in the form of increased tourism.

“It’s going to affect hotels, motels, restaurants, outfitters ... everyone’s going to benefit from an influx in metropolitan people coming to utilize East Texas outdoor recreation,” Donovan said.

The Texas Conservation Alliance has hired Brent Kartye, who is from the Lufkin area, to help talk to the public about the Neches, he said. Kartye has already spoken to Lions Clubs as part of the initiative.

Donovan said in order for the Neches to be designated as a National Scenic River, the U.S. Congress would first have to pass a bill authorizing the U.S. Forest Service or conduct a study analyzing the river’s qualification for the designation.

The study would take about three years and is “a very well researched thing socially and environmentally,” he said.

If the study passes, Donovan said the U.S. Congress would then have to pass another bill designating the Neches as a National Scenic River under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

The “Neches looks in many respects like it did when Davy Crockett crossed it...,” he said. “There is a hunger for people to get out and enjoy nature.”

And Darrell Prein, president of the Jacksonville Economic Development Corporation, said that is the case for people in the Jacksonville area.

“I think it’s a pretty nice destination for some. ... There’s a lot of interest in the Jacksonville area to keep that scenic ambiance...,” he said.