Texas waterways under attack

Congress tries to block EPA from protecting waters

Over the last decade, polluters have been able to chip away at key protections in the Clean Water Act, leaving Barton Springs, Galveston Bay, the Trinity River and other Texas waterways in need of stronger protections from pollution.

The good news is that the Environmental Protection Agency is moving to update clean water standards and restore critical protections. It’s an important advance for our waters, but far from a done deal given opposition from polluters and attempts by some members of Congress to block the EPA from doing its job.

EPA targeted by polluters

Earlier in the year, lobbyists for factory farms, developers and other polluters got their allies on Capitol Hill to include a number of amendments that strip environmental protections as part of the budget process. Among the amendments was one that would slash funding for preventing sewage overflows and block the EPA from taking action to restore Clean Water Act protections.

Environment Texas and our allies across the country worked to expose the polluter influence behind the amendments, as well as to show broad public support for clean water protections. On Feb. 14, we presented EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson with thousands of Valentines for clean water signed by citizens in strong support of protections for our waters.

On March 9, the Senate rejected the budget package containing these anti-clean water amendments by a margin of 56-44, but there is little doubt that polluters will try again soon.

Environment Texas’ next steps

This summer, Environment Texas’ citizen outreach staff will build support among Texans on behalf of increased protections for several of our most treasured waters: Barton Springs, Galveston Bay and the Trinity River.

By bringing together thousands of Texans in support of strong protections for these waterways, we hope to show the EPA the backing it needs to forge ahead and update protections for our waters—despite attempts by polluters and their allies in Congress to block this progress.

Scientists say that, left uncontrolled, pollution will ultimately close Barton Springs to swimming.

To read more about our work to protect Barton Springs, visit our website at: www.EnvironmentTexas.org/preserving-texas
To our members

If you’re anything like me, you’ve had it with the Perry administration’s treatment of the environment.

The state environment commission routinely looks the other way when industry violates the law. Rather than working cooperatively with federal officials to reduce the harmful pollution threatening the health of our families, Gov. Rick Perry has chosen to use lawsuits and bombastic rhetoric to try to block action. Now, with state parks and clean air programs on the line, the governor is threatening a veto if lawmakers try to keep them going using the state’s Rainy Day Fund.

But rather than just whine and complain, my staff and I are doing everything we can to make a difference for our environment. If, like me, you’re feeling frustrated, visit our website and take action today.

Sincerely,

Luke Metzger
State Director

Environment Texas

Recent action

Legislature poised to raid funding for state parks

At least seven state parks could be closed down due to massive cuts in funding, including Blanco State Park in Blanco County, Lockhart State Park in Caldwell County, and Lake Casa Blanca International State Park near Laredo. The Texas Parks & Wildlife Department would also be forced to eliminate funding for local parks and playgrounds, and possibly to close campgrounds and curtail other services.

The budget cuts come despite more than an adequate amount of revenue in the State Parks Fund. The sales taxes on sporting goods, fees to purchase conservation license plates, and entrance fees to parks are all supposed to be dedicated to paying for our parks, but lawmakers are reallocating these funds for other purposes.

Budget cuts may also prevent the Parks & Wildlife Department from completing its purchase of a new state park near the Dallas-Fort Worth area. In 2006, Gov. Rick Perry pledged to use funds from the sale of Eagle Mountain Lake State Park in Fort Worth to create a new state park. However, the proposal would divert those funds to other purposes.

Budget slashes clean air programs

More than two-thirds of Texans live in places where, on certain days of the year, the air is unsafe to breathe. Pollution from old cars and trucks is a big source of the pollution, but thanks to the “Drive a Clean Machine” program, many Texans are able to repair or replace their polluting vehicle. Yet, at the time this update went to print, the Legislature was poised to adopt a budget that eliminates this funding.

Approximately 17,000 cars will be left belching pollution on Texas roads because of the Legislature’s move. In addition, a program to retrofit dirty diesel construction equipment would also be cut in half. Both programs are self-funded, so the budget cuts amount to raids on the clean air funds in order to pay for unrelated projects.
For a healthy future, update the Clean Air Act

There’s no doubt that the Clean Air Act, which turned 40 in 2010, has improved the health and well-being of millions of Americans. Its protections are credited with saving the lives of 160,000 Americans in 2010 alone.

Of course, air pollution remains a pressing health threat in this country, a stark reminder of the work still left to do. 13,200 Americans lost their lives as a result of heart attacks, strokes, asthma attacks and other fatal conditions brought on or exacerbated by air pollution from power plants. It’s estimated that one in six women of childbearing age has enough mercury in her bloodstream (a byproduct of coal power production) to put her child at risk should she become pregnant.

Thankfully, the Obama administration has announced it will seek to strengthen and update portions of the Clean Air Act in the coming months.

An assault on our health

With some vocal opponents of the Clean Air Act throwing their weight around in Congress, Environment Texas, along with our national federation Environment America, the American Lung Association and other public health organizations are building support to make sure the administration’s proposals go through.

In January, Environment Texas released a hard-hitting examination of one of the most dangerous air pollutants: mercury. According to that report, “Dirty Energy’s Assault on our Health,” four plants in Texas made it into the top 10 most polluting power plants in the United States in 2009, with the Martin Lake Steam Electric Station & Lignite Mine the worst in the nation, emitting 2,660 pounds of mercury.

A taste of things to come?

The Obama administration’s updates to the Clean Air Act face great uncertainty, with polluting industries and their allies in Congress launching an all-out assault on the law.

In February, the House of Representatives attached a provision to a federal funding bill that would have blocked the Environmental Protection Agency from cutting mercury pollution from cement plants, cleaning up soot pollution, and reducing carbon dioxide from coal-fired plants.

Less than a month later, the Senate rejected the funding bill, with many senators citing the environmental and public health attacks within the bill as one of the reasons for their opposition.

Yet, with some members of Congress still trying to block the EPA from doing its job and protecting our air, Environment Texas is continuing to work for clean air and a healthier future.

2010, a breakthrough year for solar

In an otherwise lackluster year for the economy, the solar industry shone brighter than ever in 2010, with a 67 percent increase in the amount of solar energy projects installed across America compared to 2009.

That means millions more homes and businesses powered by pollution-free solar energy, an increase made possible by strong solar policies implemented at the urging of Environment Texas and other Environment America state affiliates.

In December, Clean Energy Advocate Sean Garren led our charge in Congress to extend critical incentives for solar power, while Environment Texas helped secure funding for the largest solar installation on a school in Texas (see page 4).

Environment Texas staff continue to strategize with entrepreneurs within the solar industry to hit a far more ambitious benchmark: getting 10 percent of our nation’s energy from solar by 2030.

It’s time to help Texas go solar by creating rebates and incentives to make it easier for homeowners and businesses to install solar on their rooftops, investing in solar for schools and in large-scale solar farms, and requiring utilities to pay consumers a fair price for surplus electricity they generate.

Get Texas off oil

Environment Texas staff and supporters wait for the train in Austin.

To read more about our support for public transportation, visit us online at: www.EnvironmentTexas.org

High schools in Pasadena and South Houston boast the largest arrays of solar panels of Texas schools, thanks to funding secured by Environment Texas. In February, construction was completed at three solar installations totaling 145 kilowatts of energy at Sam Rayburn and South Houston high schools. The solar panels will save the Pasadena Independent School District $15,000 per year on their electric bill.

“Solar schools are a great way to reduce pollution, save money and help teach kids about science and technology,” said Luke Metzger, director of Environment Texas.

The schools are incorporating the solar panels into their curriculum, teaching about solar in science, math, history and other classes. Environment Texas and Sierra Club arranged for the $2 million in funding for the project as part of the settlement of a Clean Air Act lawsuit against Shell Oil.