

ANRA agrees to hold conservation easement

By CHRISTINE S. DIAMOND, The Lufkin Daily News

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An Angelina County landowner has placed a conservation easement on 715 acres of family land adjacent to the Neches River east of Diboll.

While the property owner, who asked to remain anonymous, and his heirs will maintain technical ownership and use of the mixed forest and hardwood bottomlands, the conservation easement permanently protects the land from development, subdividing or installation of sewage systems, according to Andy Jones, director of the Texas office of The Conservation Fund, and Kenneth Reneau, general manager of Angelina & Neches River Authority.

ANRA on Tuesday agreed to hold the conservation easement.

"We just felt it would be beneficial for the river as a whole," Reneau said. He said the easement would help "maintain some of the more pristine areas along the river."

The easement is important because it provides a buffer to the 33,000-acre Middle Neches River project, the officials said. The buffer zone will protect the quality of water flowing through the Middle Neches River tract, they said.

"We are increasing the size of a pretty nice ecosystem," Jones said.

ANRA's agreement to hold the conservation easement will create, "in the long run, a more comprehensive footprint in the ecosystem," he said. "Anything we do on that river affects everything up and down the river."

The area could also be a possible habitat for black bears should they return to Texas, Jones said.

The 33,000-acre region is owned jointly by The Conservation Fund and Renewable Resources. The two organizations originally purchased the Middle Neches River lands from International Paper in June 2003 with the intention of turning them over to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department once the I-69 corridor project is under way, Jones said.

When the state begins buying easements for the corridor, it will need to mitigate, or offset, the destruction of wetlands and other areas, Jones said. In essence, the Middle Neches River is a "mitigation bank," he said.

"It is a creative use of those mitigation funds to help Texas Parks and Wildlife acquire land," he said.

Until then, a division of International Paper that specializes in conservation management is contracted to continue its upkeep of the lands, Jones said.

"The (Conservation) Fund is working with landowners within the project area to secure easements along the Neches River where we do not own property, to better buffer the project property and provide for a more comprehensive management plan for the whole project area," Jones stated in a press release.

Conservation easements require an agency to "hold" the easement, which The Conservation Fund doesn't do, Jones said. That's why the organization sought ANRA's cooperation, he said.

Jones said ANRA is unique, compared to many other river authorities, in that it is "very environmentally aware of the whole basin ecosystem."

ANRA is also aware that its plans to build Lake Columbia will have effects downstream on the National Big Thicket Preserve and will also require mitigation, Jones said.

"ANRA is setting an excellent example for conservation in Texas by accepting and managing this easement," Jones stated in the press release. "With our partners, we are designing environmental solutions that slow land fragmentation, protect air and water quality, safeguard important wildlife habitat and strengthen the local economies. Together, we are preserving vast tracts of working forestland across

East Texas."

ANRA was created by the Texas Legislature and serves 16 counties in East Texas.

"This is admittedly an unusual role for a river authority, but it is consistent with our board's desire to play a greater role with the East Texas environment while at the same time developing needed water supplies for areas within our river basin," ANRA board president Carl Ray Polk stated in the press release.

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