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formula used in the calculation is complex, but sometimes is as high as 3:1 ratio.

Lake Columbia will flood approximately 10,131 acres on Mud Creek between Jacksonville and New Summerfield. However, the Corps has already agreed to two key suggestions made by ANRA consultants. The Corps agreed that Lake Columbia will create what is known as "fringe wetlands" along certain segments of the reservoir. Those wetlands will be counted as part of the land mitigation. Mitigation involves purchasing land for plant and animal habitat to replace land which is flooded.

The Corps also accepted a proposal to mitigate some of the wetlands in Southeast Texas in the Big Thicket National Preserve. This national park was created in 1974, and has been called the "geographic crossroads of America." Nowhere else in the U.S. do orchids and insectivorous plants grow in the same area as cactus. The preserve consists of nine separate land tracts in a "chain of pearls" concept. ANRA would like to meet mitigation requirements by paying for land that will be added to the Big Thicket National Preserve.

"The methodologies used and the philosophies overall in the basin were, 'How do we address the mitigation in the Big Thicket?' The environmental community has supported this idea, and it makes sense," said Mr. Holcomb, as he used a laser pointer to trace the path of Mud Creek into the Angelina River, into Steinhagen Reservoir and through the Big Thicket.

The Lake Columbia calculation took into account federal law invoking "territorial waters of the United States," which consists of each navigable segment of Mud Creek. Freese-Nichols consultants determined that Lake Columbia will need to mitigate 5,773 acres.

Once the 404 permit is received, Mr. Holcomb said that his first priority will be to re-verify the water participants and the percentage of water they wish to own. Currently, the 18 water participants are pledged to own 63 percent of the lake's total. (See sidebar.)

Two bills passed by state Rep. Chuck Hopson and state Sen. Robert Nichols in 2009 authorized the Texas Water Development Board to be a participant in Lake Columbia, with a share not to exceed 50 percent. Legislation also removed a looming deadline which could have jeopardized the lake, which has fallen behind schedule.

Water participants will be given an opportunity to back out of the project, keep the same level of participation or increase their participation. The cities of Rusk and Jacksonville, for example, have agreed to purchase five percent of Lake Columbia. The city of Tyler, on the other hand, has previously opted in and opted out.

"I fully expect every entity will change participation by some degree," he said. "However, they will only have six months to decide, and the participation list will be finalized."

Land acquisition will begin shortly after the 404 approval, and Mr. Holcomb predicts that East Texas will feel a boon.

Some of the high-dollar projects associated with the construction will include the new bridges for U.S. Highway 79, Texas Highway 135 and a rail line for Union Pacific. The U.S. Highway 79 construction carries a price tag of \$30 million, and the Union Pacific bridge, \$25 million.

Rep. Hopson said he has heard that some federal dollars may be available which could help defray the highway and rail construction costs. He said he is following Lake Columbia's progress carefully, and he hopes the permitting process meshes with the availability of federal funds.

Other expensive costs for Lake Columbia include the relocation of three high voltage power lines and numerous pipelines and gas wells.

"Some of the pipelines are 70 years old and will have to be rerouted," he said.

Delays, even minor ones, add up to higher construction costs and potentially higher land costs. Mr. Holcomb said he is poised to see the project through to the end.

When he closes his eyes, he can see the 6,800-foot earthen dam taking shape; the sparkling waters, a full-service RV park, boat ramps and a park office with a hot pot of coffee for game wardens and sheriff's deputies.

It's too early to design plans for a memorial for the lake's namesakes – the crew members of the Space Shuttle Columbia who perished on Feb. 1, 2003.

But that will come – once the permit 404 is approved.

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