

Local Legislators Spur Progress on Lake Level

**Maurice Patterson, Co-Chair, Toledo Bend Bi-State Alliance, and
Glen Provost, Coordinator, Save Toledo Bend Campaign**

Sabine County, Texas - Area residents concerned about low summer and fall lake levels in Toledo Bend may soon be seeing some significant progress in addressing this long-standing problem. Legislation addressing the problem has been drafted and will likely be introduced in the Texas House by Rep. Wayne Christian and similar legislation is being considered by Sen. Robert Nichols for introduction in the Texas Senate. Details of the legislation are still being finalized. However, the draft that has been made available to representatives of the Toledo Bend Bi-State Alliance could result in the achievement of the long sought goal of assuring the Toledo Bend lake level as a matter of state policy is routinely maintained at a minimum level of 168 feet. Were this to become a legislative reality it would be very good news indeed for property owners, anglers, boaters, tourists, local elected officials, and the business community of Sabine and surrounding counties.

Legislators take lead

The fact that Toledo Bend is managed jointly by the states of Texas and Louisiana makes a revision to state law the most practical way to ensure a permanent solution to the lake level problem. As a result, the interest by area legislators in resolving the matter, particularly by legislators, Sen. Robert Nichols and Rep. Wayne Christian, is especially significant. Before moving forward with legislation, Nichols and Christian took the time and made the effort to meet and discuss the matter with concerned individuals and organizations with substantial stakes in the future of the lake.

Nichols and Christian consulted with municipal and county elected officials, local business leaders, representatives of the Toledo Bend Bi-State Alliance, the utility companies who purchase power generated by the Toledo Bend dam, and with the Sabine River Authority which manages the dam, about legislative options. In addition, Nichols and Christian have been seeking advice and input from their legislative colleagues, including Representative Mike Hamilton whose legislative district includes Newton County.

Those of us with the Bi-State Alliance are delighted with these recent developments and are continuing to do all we can to assist in the efforts of these legislators to find a solution that will preserve Toledo Bend which we all recognize as critical to the future of east Texas. We all understand the limits on what can be accomplished without the assistance of our legislators and other locally elected officials, and it is for this reason that we are so appreciative of the leadership roles being taken by Sen. Nichols and Rep. Christian.

Utility Companies and Sabine River Authority participation

Even with legislative leadership and support, it will be difficult to find a lasting, workable, and legally defensible lake level solution without the other stakeholders also engaging in the process in good faith. Two of the stakeholders that would be most directly affected by the outcome of the search for a solution have shown a real interest in doing what is necessary to get the lake level issue finally resolved. The utility companies, particularly Entergy, Inc., appear to have been working diligently with legislators and other stakeholders and have expressed their belief that a legislative solution can be identified that both will protect their business interests and also resolve the lake level issue. In addition, the Sabine River Authority of Texas has shown a willingness to actively participate in this effort and appears determined not to let bureaucratic rigidity keep the agency from helping to find a solution.

Local Government and Business Community pledge support

The involvement of each of these groups and individuals has been extremely important to the lake level effort, yet it is unlikely that much progress could have been made had it not been for the various public expressions of support from local elected officials and local business organizations. Resolutions passed by the Sabine and Shelby county commissioners' courts and the Sabine County Chamber of Commerce that both emphasize the vital importance of Toledo Bend to the economic well being of the region and pledge support for the lake level effort represent clear statements to legislators and others of the level of local support and concern.

The Future

We are hopeful legislation will be enacted during this session of the Legislature that addresses the major lake level concerns of all the various stakeholders. However, even under the best of circumstances, securing final passage of legislation by both Houses of the Legislature and obtaining the Governor's signature could be difficult, complex, time consuming, and fraught with all sorts of potential obstacles. Even so, our chances of succeeding this legislative session have improved by an order of magnitude as a result of the energetic involvement of Sen. Nichols and Rep. Christian and their colleagues. If this effort is successful it would be an impressive reminder to us of: what can be accomplished by an organized grassroots effort of determined citizens; how important political leadership like that assumed by Sen. Nichols and Rep. Christian is to such an effort; and how essential a healthy Toledo Bend is to the economic vitality of our region of the state. We also want to particularly express our appreciation to the members of the Bi-State Alliance, including both those from Texas and from Louisiana. Many of those folks have toiled tirelessly and thanklessly for many years to try to save and protect Toledo Bend. If this effort bears legislative fruit, we may well have collectively succeeded in saving for future generations a state and national treasure that deserves to be cherished and protected by us all.