

EDITORIAL: Refuge vs. reservoir

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Dallas officials have every right to consider how their city is going to provide water for their constituents over the next several decades.

They're wrong to consider the Neches River as a source.

Dallas shows no signs of backing off from its proposal to invest in Fastrill Reservoir, which if constructed would be located on the Upper Neches River in Anderson and Cherokee counties, between Palestine and Rusk. The city of Dallas is going through with six-figure studies to determine whether the project is feasible, but we can answer that.

It's not.

There are several reasons the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service last year began the process of designating 25,000 acres of Neches River bottomland hardwoods – in the same location as the proposed Fastrill site – as a national wildlife refuge. For one, Texas has already lost most of its bottomland hardwood; for another, the area houses hundreds of species of reptiles, amphibians, fish, mammals and plants.

Flooding the site to create Fastrill Reservoir would not only threaten what's left of the habitat, it would reduce the water flow to the rest of the Neches River, likely causing damage to the Big Thicket National Preserve and other areas downstream.

Simply put, the proposed refuge and the proposed reservoir are not compatible. They cannot coexist.

Dallas is partnering with the Upper Neches River Authority in its attempt to build Fastrill as a backup water source, and Dallas Water Utilities director Robert M. Johnson stated in a March 16 letter to the U.S. Fish And Wildlife Service that he hoped the government agency could come up with an “alternative footprint” in its goal to protect the bottomland hardwood habitat of East Texas.

“With respect to the Refuge having an alternate footprint,” Domenick R. Ciccone, regional chief of the National Wildlife Refuge System, wrote back on March 21, “we would be hard-pressed at this point to develop a refuge elsewhere along the Neches River. The 25,000 acres of land we have identified in our proposal are unique. They present the best opportunity for our agency to protect the dwindling bottomland hardwood resources in Texas.

“The more the footprints of a reservoir and the proposed Refuge overlap, the less likely we would be able to meet our habitat objectives.”

Today is the last day the public can submit feedback to the Fish and Wildlife Service regarding its plans to build a national wildlife refuge on the Upper Neches. For more information, visit the Web site www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/Plan/index.html.

It's our understanding that the national wildlife refuge designation would kill any chance that Fastrill – or any other lake – would be constructed on that part of the Neches River.

That's OK by us.