

PRESS RELEASE FROM JANUARY 23 MEETING

Officials of the Lower Neches River Authority have told members of the East Texas Regional Water Planning Group that the authority does not seek to control water rights in the upper river basin, but does want to protect its existing rights to serve planned industrial development in the Beaumont area.

Robert Stroder, LNVA's general manager, and members of his staff told the Group at a meeting in Nacogdoches "it was never our intent to damage existing water rights in the upper basin, but we don't want to step back from our own rights."

The Angelina & Neches River Authority, joined by municipalities and other water users above Sam Rayburn Reservoir, announced last year that it would take legal action to protect the water rights it holds for participants in the Lake Columbia project on Mud Creek in Cherokee and Smith counties.

In documents filed with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, the LNVA sought to make its 1963 water rights to water flowing into Rayburn Reservoir override the rights of other users, including municipalities, after 1963.

Stroder said LNVA has filed an amendment to its TCEQ request that he said should alleviate upstream concerns.

Members of the Planning Group had numerous questions for LNVA.

"We need to work out something that's fair to the entire Neches basin," said Monty Shank, a Group member, "because there is an impact to what was proposed."

Kelley Holcomb of Lufkin, chairman of the Planning Group, said the concerns by the water planners "are examples of competing water interests all over Texas, but I hope we can find common answers to solve all of the water needs in East Texas."

"As planners, we need to look at our entire region and keep in mind that our job is to assure that everyone has adequate water supplies for the future," said Holcomb.

He said the LNVA's amended request to the TCEQ does not require the approval of the Planning Group because it affects an existing rights permit.

As it began its new round of planning for twenty East Texas counties,

the Planning Group appointed the City of Nacogdoches as its new administrative entity, replacing the Deep East Texas Council of Governments of Jasper, which resigned the position.

The Group also elected a new slate of officers, including Holcomb as chairman again; Worth Whitehead of Henderson as first vice-chairman, Mike Harbordt of Diboll as second vice-chairman; Jerry Clark of Orange, secretary; David Brock of Jacksonville, assistant secretary; and Leon Young and David Alders, both of Nacogdoches, at-large members of the executive committee.

George Campbell of Nacogdoches will chair the nominating committee, David Alders will chair the by-laws committee; Darla Smith of Beaumont will head the finance committee, and Harbordt will chair the technical committee.

Gary Graham of Beaumont, the Planning Group's engineering consultant, said engineers are working on several tasks assigned by the Group.

Terry Stelly of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department told the Group that biologists have a growing concern about a "dead zone" in the Gulf of Mexico, which he said is affecting marine life and commercial fishing.

He said the dead zone is the result of oxygen depletions ultimately caused by excessive nitrate levels carried into the gulf by the Mississippi River. Storm water discharges from farming operations upstream from the Gulf of Mexico carry the nutrients into the gulf which eventually results in depressed dissolved oxygen levels off of the Texas and Louisiana coastlines.

The Group's next meeting will be on April 9 in Nacogdoches. The Group serves all or parts of Anderson, Angelina, Cherokee, Hardin, Henderson, Houston, Jasper, Jefferson, Nacogdoches, Newton, Orange, Panola, Polk, Rusk, Sabine, San Augustine, Shelby, Smith, Trinity and Tyler counties.