

San Antonio River Authority Environmental Advisory Committee (EAC)

Q2 2025 Meeting Minutes

January 24th, 2025. 11:20 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Aransas National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center (1 Wildlife Circle, Austwell, Tx 77950)

EAC Attendees:	EAC Absent:
James Dodson (JD)	Annalisa Peace
Joedy Yglesias (JY)	Stephen Lucke
Glynis Strauss (GS)	Mary Lozano
Dr. Janis Bush (JB) - virtual	Connie Waters
Jason Katcsmorak (JK) - virtual	
Carl Clapsaddle (CC)	
Dr. Heather Hansen (HH)	San Antonio River Authority Staff Attendees:
John Hooker (JH)	Emily Rew (ER)
Christopher Fullerton (CF)	Salem Farner (SF)
	Julen Navarrete (JN)
	Janine Garcia (JG)
	Shaun Donovan (SD)
Citizens to be heard:	Alicia Ramsey (AR)
Liz Smith (LS)	Minna Paul (MP)
Cheryl Wallek (CW)	Samantha Villanueva (SV)
	Amanda Spencer (AS)
	John & Gina Yochem (SA River Authority Board) (JY, GY)

1. Welcome

- James Dodson (**JD**) – Introduction of Committee and River Authority Staff. Introduction to the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge and its mission.
- Approval of previous Q1 Minutes.

2. Water for Whooping Cranes Wintering Along the Middle Texas Coast

James A. Dodson

Water in Texas is managed under two legal frameworks: Surface water (property of the State of Texas, can be permitted for private/public use) and groundwater (private property associated with surface estate – but is now regulated by local groundwater conservation districts). This may complicate water resource management holistically for the benefit of the environment as surface water is influenced by groundwater and vice versa. Regional Water Management Planning Areas were created to develop water supply strategies pertinent to the surface/groundwater of the expansive and various regions of Texas and project many different water-use sectors, needs, and available supply. Few water rights have been issued for permitting environmental flows.

Estuaries throughout Texas that originate from as far as West Texas will eventually flow to the coast, although managing the water along its entire route to ensure flow to the bays is a challenge largely in part due to reservoirs that impact natural streamflow alongside drought conditions.

Dodson serves on the Coastal Bend (Region N) board planning group and has witnessed the many challenges of this region.

Whooping Cranes need water for the ecology and environment in which they live for food choices such as Blue Crab. When the water is too salty, Blue Crab declines. Efforts to ensure ecology and food sources include two methods: Installing new and refurbishing old groundwater wells to pump into ponds to make available for Whooping Cranes and acquiring large volumes of freshwater to deliver to Texas Mid-Coast Estuaries during drought periods to maintain freshwater inflows.

“Water for Wildlife Wells” – 12 out of the 18 wells are on Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. 6 of the 18 wells are on private properties which have Conservation Easements in place. Many of these are newer wells drilled within the last ten years, some of these are old windmill wells that have been converted to solar wells. Hurricane Harvey in 2017 caused a lot of damage to these wells in August with the expectation of Cranes to arrive in November. With the help of a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant fund, **JD** was able to refurbish all the wells in time for the Cranes arrival.

Focused Flows project – access to water through a partnership for making water purchases and target delivering this water to areas to enhance habitat for Whooping Cranes.

A more innovative approach to protecting and providing water for freshwater inflows: Aquifer Storage and Recovery (ASR) - using the aquifer system as a reservoir, Water from the Edwards Aquifer injected into Carrizo-Wilcox aquifer and using it as a reservoir. Essentially “Water Banking” for environmental flows.

Post Presentation topics discussed:

Regarding the wells being revived for auxiliary water supply, **GS** asked, “How deep are those wells?” **JD**: It varies, some of them can be between 600-800ft deep and are very expensive and that is being discovered as we are going back and trying to restore them after they have been out of use for around 20 years.

CW asks, “Why were they discontinued?” **JD**: A pipeline was built from Texana and contracted water from other sources. **GS** asks, “Are they around Choke Canyon?” **JD**: They are around Lake Corpus Christi, primarily on the Nueces River below Lake Corpus Christi.

Jl asks, “Is there a lithium processing plant being built outside of Robstown that’s going to use billions of gallons of water?” **JD**: Yes, there are many other intensive water use industries that are looking to locate to this region and the city does not want to tell them that they cannot have the water, but they do not have the water.

CF, regarding pumping ponds for Whooping Cranes, asks, “Are the cranes willing to share their crane tanks?” **JD**: They are very sociable, Liz may know more as she has been studying them for some time. **GS**, “Are those tanks just holes in the ground or concrete tanks?” **JD**: They are just

shallow little ponds that imitate natural ponds. A lot of times we must build ponds to put the water in, sometimes they're already there and we just put a well near it to supply it with water.

GS asks the question, "What are conservation easements?" **JD**: When a landowner agrees to sell or lease certain property rights, a conservation easement, the landowner usually gets paid to do something that protects the habitat, it might be putting a well in, there's all kinds of conservation easements for various purposes, we've had tremendous support and success working with landowners. **GS**, "How many landowners are around the Whooping Crane range?" **LS**: It was around 11 about 5 years ago but now things are being subdivided, and the birds have expanded northward into new areas around Garwood. **JD**: Specifically, off the Colorado River, they have taken to the rice fields. **CF** asks, "As the population is growing, is that the way that they are headed?" **JD**: Well, they're moving up the coast more, were working on projects all the way up Matagorda County, inland is a new trend and something we are watching. **HH** asks, "If they're going into the rice farms, are the rice farmers unhappy about that? Is it separate from Crop time?" **JD**: I'm not exactly sure, I wouldn't think through the winter they're planting much, the question is, is there going to be water in those fields? Sometimes now we pay the landowners to leave water on the field for the whooping cranes. Those fields have lots of crawfish and other food sources.

GS asks, "Do the Cranes gain weight easily when they're down here? Is there any way to tell that?" **JD** it's hard to tell. **LS**, "No, but they're generally healthy, they're long-legged birds and live up to 30 years. We can tell by the way they move across the landscape if there is enough food. If there's not enough crabs, the crabs move to deeper water because it's less salty than shallow, then the cranes will begin roaming for food. They do eat a lot and a lot of different items, because they're large. They're five feet tall. They're adaptable in the long-term. The question is, is their system optimum and healthy? The system-wide view is the most concerning. Luckily, the cranes can move around.

HH asks, "Is there push back from landowners when you say you're using freshwater for this?"

LS – I think it's people not realizing how finite our resources are, education is the key to making this known. It is the hardest thing to do during drought as this involves people and the economy and understanding. When the drought breaks, no one talks about what we need to do next.

JY– Do cows use the stock tanks? **JD** - The ponds on private lands are multiuse for the whooping cranes and stock as well.

MP – our team does a lot of education and engagement out in the community in San Antonio, we have this beautiful watershed model that we use to showcase the connection between the river and the bay and the Whooping Crane has become our ambassador bird to talk about how species are impacted by water use along the river, Any resources that you can share with our time that they can utilize we would appreciate. We have a Whooping Crane poster that we share with students to compare their height to a Whooping Crane; we do a lot of different things to get the youth and community to think about their impact on the environment. **JD**: There is a gulf coast program office at Rockport, and there is an educator. **MP**– This would be a great opportunity for collaboration to resource share. We also have our River Warrior Program who contribute Citizen Science and Master Naturalists support the work that we do, if there is something our teams can

support you with, please let us know. **LS** – We have a great time but prior connections we’ve had could be rekindled. **MP** – this EAC committee is also our group of ambassadors that reach the community as well. Thank you, James, for helping coordinate this to bring everybody out here and thank you to everyone who joined us today.

3. Fresh Water Inflows and Other Emerging Issues

Shaun Donovan, Manager Environmental Sciences

1997, 2001, and 2007 Senate Bills 1, 2, & 3 – legislative actions

#1 – freshwater and inflow needs for “sound ecological environment” that is a catch-all statement and very subjective, issues with what “sound” is and for who and what.

Freshwater Inflow Needs – regional water planning for localized areas is important as the state’s water needs and sources vary so greatly. Two goals: economically and ecologically important species. Economically important – huge recreational fishing industry on the coast of Texas. Ecologically characteristic – Whooping cranes. Instream flows and freshwater inflows were regarded in a consumptive perspective (shrimp, oysters, and fish!)

SB2 – Intended to define Instream Flows (a measure of how much water is flowing in a stream): What data exists, goals, data collection, and recommendations, draft study report, and final study report. It is important for supporting wildlife continuously (e.g. freshwater mussels).

Goal for the Lower SA River Tx Instream Flows Program (TIFP)- used to assess aquatic life and habitat, water quality, riparian assessments, stream channel formation

SB3 – Data and goals exist – now how much water should be flowing through a river or creek system to achieve these goals and now we have the data to make these informed recommendations and set Environmental Flow standards (E-Flow).

BBASC Bay and Basin Area Stakeholder Committee– diverse team of individuals as area stakeholders

BBEST Bay and Basin Expert Science Team – team of expert science team.

BBEST would make recommendations and BBASC would agree, disagree, or adjust to settle on flow recommendations.

E-Flow and Freshwater Inflow standards can be found on slides.

Next steps – Part of Senate Bill 3 is to revisit these standards every decade.

Post Presentation topics discussed:

We as an entity are based on scientifically sound data. We have confidence in our recommendations and data.

CF – In addition to water quantity – does water quality matter here?

SD - Water Quality is part of this component but in an urban system the peaks and valleys – when it rains water quality greatly declines.

JH – On baseflow minima, when it gets too low is that when you can restrict withdrawals, by whom, surface water users? **SD** – Those who possess permits that are newer than the standards would have to abide by restrictions, senior water rights holders, can essentially pump as much as they'd like. **HH**- So the planning done in our region, how the planning around is done, does it make a difference since we are confined to an area. **SD** - The larger statewide conceptual planning, but all the water that flows well above SAR affects Guadalupe as well. When the water planning regions were created, they were created by watershed.

4. Future meetings dates and items for future consideration:

Discussed next meeting time, date, location: The Q2 FY 24/25 meeting will occur on April 18th, 2025, at the San Antonio River Authority Guenther office.

Meeting adjourned at 1:00 pm.