

Environmental Exchange

A publication of the Citizens' Environmental Coalition

January 2004
Newsletter &
Calendar

The Houston-Galveston area's most comprehensive coverage of environmental news and events.

City of Galveston passes controversial plan for beach access

by Erika McDonald
Staff Writer

In December, Galveston City Council unanimously approved a beach access plan, its first since 1993. Stirring controversy was a provision to close a four-mile stretch of beach on San Luis Pass to vehicular traffic. On both sides, opponents are using environmental concerns to justify their position.

At a hearing that preceded city council's vote most spoke in favor of the plan citing safety concerns. Supporters also complained that driving on the beach destroys the delicate dune system. Opposing the plan are the Texas Open Beach Advocates, a group comprised of Galveston residents and out-of-towners who frequent the beach. TOBA members argue that environmental concerns are being used to cloak the city's real agenda, they say is to accommodate development. They argue the major factor in beach erosion is overdeveloping on the island.

City council member, John Driess said he thought the plan was a fair compromise. "It offers diversity. ... We have 18 or 19 access points with a total of four-five miles of beach with vehicle access," he said.

Two weeks after passing the beach access plan, council approved a land use plan for Centex, a development company that has built homes on public beaches throughout the city's West End.

Over the past 25 years, 17 miles of public beach have been closed to cars. TOBA hired environmental attorney Jim Blackburn who argued that the city's access plan violates the Texas Open Beaches Act, a state law that

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EPA's new mercury rules leave local communities vulnerable

by Erika McDonald
Staff Writer

The fishing is good on Sam Rayburn Lake this time of year. But generations who have grown up fishing and eating from the bountiful East Texas waters say these days they have to throw back most of what they catch. Like 12 other state water bodies and the entire Gulf Coast, Sam Rayburn is under a state issued fishing advisory for mercury contamination.

In the rural community of Rivercrest, which lies on the north banks of the Sam Rayburn, many residents depend on fish from the lake and the nearby Angelina River, also contaminated, for subsistence. Neighbors say an unusually high number of children in the community suffer from mental retardation and other developmental problems and learning disabilities. One resident, Jimmy Lehrer said he is angry that mercury emissions are not monitored by state agencies and that there are no signs posted at the lakes warning about mercury.

"I raised my daughter on these fish," he said. "The people are being poisoned and nobody knows about it."

Mercury is a heavy metal linked to neurological and developmental disorders. It is emitted by coal burning power plants and then settles to the ground where it washes into streams and lakes. Through a process called bio-accumulation, mercury is stored in fish tissue and makes its way up the food chain to human beings. The level of mercury in tested fish is often one million times higher than in the water.

Because there is currently no monitor-

ing, Lehrer and his neighbors were looking forward to an EPA deadline last month for the agency to release guidelines that would have forced coal burning power plants to cut emissions.

"Texas plants will be allowed to continue their toxic reign of terror over our communities,"
—Public Citizens' Tom Smith

Instead, the EPA proposed a cap and trade plan that will set a broad limit for mercury emissions, and allow companies that meet the limit to sell pollution credits to companies that continue to emit. While the plan will reduce the total level of mercury emissions nationwide, groups that were advocating for tougher rules say it leaves hot spots like Texas, which leads the country in mercury emissions, unprotected.

Public Citizens' Tom "Smitty" Smith said Texas plants, recently forced to reduce nitrogen oxide emissions, would more than likely opt to buy credits from plants in other states than go through another round of costly pollution controls.

"There is nothing in this plan that guarantees local plants will clean up," he said. "Texas plants will be allowed to continue their toxic reign of terror over our communities."

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Environmental Exchange

The Environmental Exchange is published by the Citizens' Environmental Coalition (CEC), an information clearinghouse and communications network for environmental issues in the Houston-Galveston area. The CEC mission is to improve the quality of life and health in the region through education, dialogue and collaboration. CEC serves the general public by bringing many diverse groups together to build awareness and stimulate discussion about environmental issues in the region. Programs include forums that give a balanced perspective on environmental issues, and information vehicles that enhance understanding.

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Perspectives Unhappy birthday: Local Superfund sites underfunded

by Christine Sagstetter, Houston Sierra Club

December 11, 2003 marked the 23rd birthday of the Superfund program, but there is little to celebrate. In a dismantling of environmental protection laws, the Bush-Cheney administration allowed the Superfund Trust Fund to dry up completely, and has refused to reauthorize its funding. Created in 1980 in the wake of the Love Canal tragedy, the program established a fund for cleaning up contaminated sites. Superfund monies were made up of various taxes on corporations whose products and chemicals impact the environment, crude oil received at U.S. refineries, imported petroleum products, and court awards from parties found responsible for releasing known hazardous substances. The corporate tax that put more than \$1 billion per year into the fund expired in 1995, and the Superfund ran out of money last October. Without it, taxpayers, and not the polluters, must foot the bill for continued massive clean ups.

In 1990 the *Houston Chronicle* reported 30 sites listed on the National Priorities List for clean up here in Texas, 29 identified as long-term health threats. Fifteen of those sites were in Houston and the surrounding area. As of December, Harris County alone has 11 Federal and 6 State Superfund sites. Twenty-six more Houston sites and an additional 32 in surrounding counties are currently being considered for addition to the Priorities List. The constantly increasing number of sites presents an ongoing threat to families in Houston, Harris County, and neighboring counties. Twenty-six Superfund sites have already contaminated groundwater, the drinking water source for 45% of Texans. Altogether, one in four Americans, 10 million of whom are children, lives within 4 miles of a toxic waste site that is a Superfund cleanup priority.

The Many Diversified Interests site, in the city's 5th ward is adjacent to Bruce Elementary School, and is framed on three sides by neighborhood homes. Multiple

wastes there include heavy metals, PCBs and asbestos. Mothers for Clean Air has obtained an EPA grant for a technical advisor for the community, and health assessments are under way. But the ground at 64 homes has already tested positive for heavy metals like arsenic, lead and chromium – serious known health hazards for growing children. The Crystal Chemical site, on Westpark Drive near Alief, is contaminated with arsenic and threatens 20,000 people and two public drinking water wells. The groundwater cannot be restored, and work on the site has cost \$1.8 million to date. At the Geneva Industries site on Caniff Rd, 2 miles east of Hobby airport, it has already cost \$23.2 million to remove 700 drums of contaminated soil, and treat and dispose of 35 million gallons of groundwater. The Sol Lynn/Industrial Transformers site on Loop 610 sits a few hundred yards from the Astrodome and Astroworld. Four city wells, four residential wells and 10,000 people live within 3 miles of the site where TCE, a cleaning solvent known to cause liver damage, contaminated groundwater and PCBs contaminated soil. Cleaning up the water has cost \$1.5 million to date. How will we pay for ongoing cleanup and monitoring of these and other sites?

Each annual budget request of the Bush-Cheney administration to Congress has included drastic cuts in EPA enforcement funding and staff. Without effective funding and enforcement, dangerous chemicals continue to contaminate our air, soil and drinking water, creating more communities that may suffer the same fate and personal tragedies as residents of Love Canal, or local residents living near the Brio site, where subdivisions and schools had to be shut down.

We teach our children that they are responsible for cleaning up after themselves, and the Bush-Cheney administration should demand no less of corporate polluters. Instead, the administration is letting wealthy corporations off the hook, strapping taxpayers with the bill for cleanups, placing communities at risk, and saddling future generations with a legacy of toxic waste, disease and economic hardships. These corporations have made a profit from their products, and they are responsible for the cancer-causing wastes left behind. Paying into the Trust Fund is the right thing for them to do. Making American families pay first with their health and again with their taxes is not.

Looking for oil in the Big Thicket

Reporter Eric Epp accompanied workers on a seismic exploring operation in the Big Thicket National Forest.

Deep in the woods of the Big Thicket National Preserve four men wearing vests, goggles and orange hardhats are standing around an eight-foot drill. The drill is connected to a blue tube that winds around trees and shrubs and connects to a small white cylindrical object a few hundred feet away. The saucer-like object sitting in the middle of the unspoiled forest looks like a space ship that landed in the middle of the woods.

The men are conducting seismic exploration for Omni Resources, an exploration company. They drill the hole 80 feet deep, push a charge down to 17 feet then put bentonite clay in to seal it. Later, the charges will explode underneath the ground to provide a three dimensional view for surveyors who will walk through with geophones. In January, the surveyors will gather data and sell it to oil companies that will then determine if they want to drill for oil and gas in the 1,400 acres of national preserve.

"We're just trying to get good data and minimize the footprint," said Bubba Davis who oversees the project for Omni. "Drilling these holes is the most intrusive thing we're doing and after a good rain you won't even be able to notice them."

To ensure that is the case, the National Parks Service requires the presence of a third party monitor on all oil and gas exploration projects. Monitoring the Omni drilling are Gary Kowalski and Arthur Perkins of Dixie Environmental Services Company. Because large swaths of land are cleared for the company's tractor to operate, the most salient regulations for this particular project

are designed to protect old-growth trees and endangered species. No trees greater than three inches in diameter may be cut and sensitive species, such as the Texas trailing phlox plant and canebrake rattlesnake (which make their home in the preserve) must not be disturbed when cutting the trail for the tractor. To do this a 50-foot buffer has been established between exploring operations and areas where these species may be present. Kowalski and Perkins meet with the Omni crew to go over the environmental regulations and potential ecological hazards every day.

Despite the protective measures taken by monitored seismic exploration companies, the practice raises concerns over the usage of country's first national preserve.

Maxine Johnson, a retired librarian is a pioneer in the movement to preserve the Big Thicket, recognized by the United Nations as one of the most biodiverse locations in the world.

"We have the very best example of many plant samples you can find," she said, "and if you were walking through (the forest) and you came upon a big drilling rig and all these motors and things were running and you would see oil pits and slush pits and the smell... I think that would be lacking in aesthetic value."

Johnson questioned the priorities of the NPS, which she said should be working to preserve the forest and educate the public about important ecological treasures.

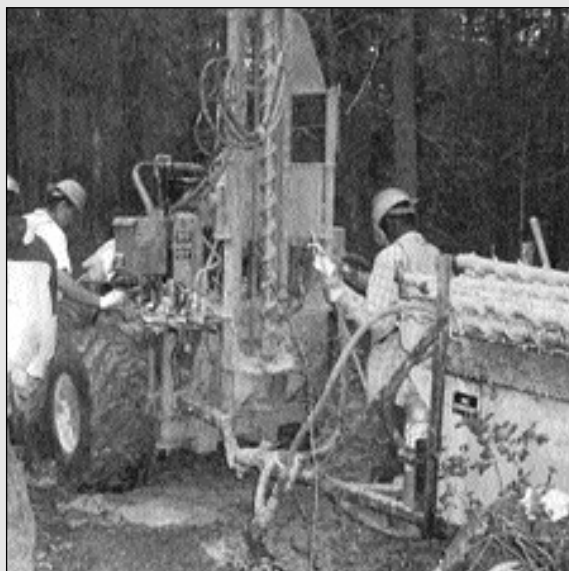
"The fact they have an oil and

gas specialist and not a biologist on staff says a lot about their priorities." Johnson said.

NPS oil and gas specialist Doug Hutter said improved technology over the past twenty years has reduced the environmental impact of seismic exploration. One technique, slant drilling, allows companies to drill on private lands outside the preserve and extract oil and gas from under the federally protected forest. One oil company, Davis Brothers, owns four wells near the preserve and is currently slant drilling. Hutter said slant drilling minimizes impact to the preserve. But conservationists have argued that the sensitive ecosystems are vulnerable and that surrounding lands should provide a buffer to industry and development.

Dan Lavery, oil and gas spokesperson with the Sierra club in Washington D.C. agreed that exploration and drilling have improved with regards to environmental impact but

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Eric Epp

Seismic explorations on public lands.

Mercury

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One of the nation's worst polluters is TXU Energy's Monticello plant emitting 1,300 pounds of mercury in 2001, the most current data available through the EPA's Toxic Release Inventory. Houston-based Reliant Energy operates three coal burning plants in Baytown, Jewett and Fort Bend County.

As plants continue to burn coal unmonitored, local health department officials said Texans should look out for advisories and

limit their consumption. Director of seafood safety for the Texas Department of Health, Kirk Wiles said the agency posts fishing advisories on their web site but lacks enough funding to post signs at Sam Rayburn Lake.

As a result, word of the advisories does not always make it to communities who need it most. Lufkin Sierra Club member Dian Avriette has been working with residents in Rivercrest to raise awareness about the contamination. She said she doubts consumption habits will change.

"I'll be down there and they'll be having a

fish fry and I say, 'what are you doing, you know what's in these fish,' and they say 'yeah, but we've got to eat something,'" she said.

As the EPA's deadline for tougher rules have come and gone, it would appear the nation's worst polluters, like those in Texas, have dodged another bullet. For communities like Rivercrest, it is an opportunity missed. The tougher rules EPA had been drafting over the last three years would have reduced local mercury emissions by 90 percent. ☉

Coalition Notes

Stop the Grand Pkwy Web site debuts

The Houston Sierra Club this week announced they have a new tool in their anti-sprawl campaign to halt further construction on the Grand Parkway. A new web site provides updated information, maps of proposed construction, links to local media coverage of the issue, upcoming events and meetings and an online petition against the parkway. Campaign organizer Christine Sagstetter said she hopes activists and concerned citizens will use the site to network and to keep informed. Visit the new web site at: <<http://www.stop-grandparkway.com/>>.

Resource Corner

Helpful hints for CEC member organizations

Community Mapping Studio at Gulf Coast Institute

The Gulf Coast Institute maintains a community mapping studio using advanced geographic information systems to create visual representations of data related to a variety of related issues, from the depletion of the urban forest to management of the regional watershed, to the dynamics of rational transportation development. To date, the studio has provided GIS services to more than 20 nonprofit organizations and governmental agencies, often without charge. For more information, contact GCI at (713) 524-5757 or visit them on the Web at www.gulfcoastideas.org.

Coalition members co-host environmental video series

Join the Citizens' Environmental Coalition, Mothers for Clean Air and the Sierra Club's National Sprawl Campaign for an enjoyable series of three videos on the topic of urban sprawl beginning in January and continuing through March. The videos will feature the beginning and continuation of urban sprawl and cover the consequences of sprawl from effects on quality of life to the effects on our health.

Film Schedule

Subdivide and Conquer, January 23 at 7:00 pm.

Save Our Land, Save Our Towns, February 27, 7:00 pm.

The Air We Breathe, 7:00 pm, March 26

Each one-hour screening will be preceded by a time for conversation and networking with free refreshments beginning at 6:15 pm and followed by a short, open discussion.

All the videos will be shown on the fourth Friday of the month at the Upper Kirby District Building, 3015 Richmond, which houses the Houston Environmental Center.

State's grant and outreach program for Galveston Bay underway

The Galveston Bay Education & Outreach Grant Program, funded by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality is now available online.

The GBEP/TCEQ anticipates awarding \$120,000 in multiple grants ranging from \$10,000 to \$25,000 in 2004. The grant program is implemented under the authority of Texas Water Code Sections 5.124 and 5.125.

All grant applications must be submitted to Regina Adams, by 3 pm on Friday January 19. All details pertaining to the grant proposal application process can be found on the Texas Market Place web site at: <<http://esbd.tbpc.state.tx.us>>.

EcoNotes

Houston parks lack more than just land

Houston's parks department is struggling to meet city maintenance requirements, according to a study by parks consultant Leon Younger. Houston's park problems are not new. Previous studies have shown that Houston ranks near the bottom nationally in park space and funding per capita. The Younger study indicates that Houston might not be able to maintain what little park space it does have. The study measured Houston Parks and Recreation Department management against other systems based on park maintenance, work orders, urban forestry, capital asset management and revenue development. It found that the department suffers from "severe lack of funding and maintenance personnel."

According to the study, more than 100 maintenance positions have been lost over the past five years because of fiscal constraint. This in part has led to a situation in which park employees are busy "putting out fires" rather than completing preventative maintenance.

Glenda Barrett, executive director of the Park People, a local nonprofit that helped fund the study, said this study proves the department is under-funded. "They do not have enough money to maintain the parks, much less acquire new land," she said. "This shows parks have not been a priority of the city. It is time to stop pointing fingers and time to start improving our park situation."

-Gulf Coast Institute

City's drainage fee dead in the water

Realizing he did not have the votes on City Council, Mayor Lee Brown admitted defeat had the final part of his 15-year, \$1.2 billion flood management plan referred back to his administration, a move that essentially killed the entire program.

This included the a hotly disputed drainage fee that was expected to produce about \$41 million a year for flood-control work, but which sparked an outcry from

residents and conservative council members who called it an illegal tax. The fee, averaging about \$2 per month for homeowners but much more for larger properties, was to apply to churches and public schools, as well as residences, businesses and government buildings.

Opponents of the fee rejoiced that the long fight had ended.

"The mayor's drainage plan is DOA," Councilman Bruce Tatro said. "It's over. We can declare victory."

Now someone has to come up with an alternative.

With Brown's administration in its final weeks, Houston will be left with no money for ditch mowing and storm sewer cleaning, in addition to the delay of \$75 million worth of neighborhood street reconstruction work and \$250 million in drainage projects, city officials say.

Brown has warned that residents could be hit with a 15 percent increase in water and sewer rates because the council did nothing to provide a funding source.

"The ultimate decision will not be made by this administration," he said.

The administration made clear earlier this year that implementation of the city's five-year Capital Improvement Plan, which includes most of the drainage and street work, depended upon approval of the drainage fee and a refinancing of the water and sewer system's debt. The council approved the CIP and, later, the drainage fee.

Without the fee, the options left open include raising water/sewer rates, or putting bond money in escrow.

To those who opposed the drainage fee, refinancing debt in the water and sewer system remains the most popular option. Brown's proposal projected that that would generate about \$50 million annually.

Burlington shareholders want answers about rainforest operations

Shareholders for Houston-based Burlington National Resources voted on a resolution last week demanding the company clearly define its policy toward indigenous communities in the Amazon rain forest where the local company is exploring for oil.

Four tribes consisting of roughly 500,000 people inhabit the remote jungle areas in

Ecuador and Peru known by the company as oil blocks 23 and 24. The presidents of the Shuar, Zapara, Shiwiari and Kichwa nations have demanded that Burlington cease operations on their land, citing environmental devastation and human rights violations. Last March, presidents of the four tribes traveled to Houston to confront Burlington officials at their Galleria headquarters and call attention to the fact that the tribes opposed exploration. The company reported to media and shareholders that they had received consent from indigenous communities. While the resisters were blocked by security guards from communicating with company officials, this week's action by shareholders maybe enough to get executives' attention.

A shareholders representative said they hope adopting the resolution will be the first step toward ensuring Burlington officials receive the consent of indigenous communities and limit environmental impacts of exploring and drilling.

Houston seeks federal grant for cleanup of area brownfields

The city of Houston in December submitted an application to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for \$2 million in grant funding to cleanup area brownfields. Brownfields are parcels of land that are too contaminated to build on, but not contaminated enough to qualify for federal Superfund status. The EPA grant money would establish a revolving fund for the city to provide loans to clean and redevelop contaminated sites. In the mayor's office of brownfields redevelopment, federal liaison David Reels said Houston currently pays out of limited operating fees to cleanup contaminated sites owned by the city. The problem, he said is cleaning up privately owned sites that are abandoned once contamination is identified.

Last year, Houston was turned down by EPA, according to Reels, because the city failed to demonstrate community involvement in the redevelopment process. This year the city held three community meetings, which it advertised in the Houston Chronicle.

Reels said a stronger application in 2003 still faces competition with other cities on

70 million dollars in federal aid available nationwide, and hundreds of cities applying for the grant.

Houston has identified more than 1,000 acres throughout the city that qualify as brownfields. More information about Houston brownfields can be found <<http://www.cityofhouston.gov>>.

State official to propose tightening of industrial emissions rule

Responding to pressure from the federal government, the state's top environmental regulator is proposing to tighten Texas' policy on the periodic industrial emissions that account for millions of pounds of excess pollution in the Houston area each year.

Texas Commission on Environmental Quality commissioners will vote today on a draft rule that removes the long-standing exemption for pollution emitted during maintenance, startups, shutdowns and accidents at industrial plants.

If industry doesn't prove that these events were unavoidable, along with other criteria, the proposed regulation would either require the emissions to be permitted or be considered a violation. These violations carry no monetary penalties, but will be added to a company's overall compliance record and considered when looking at the frequency of upsets at a facility.

The change rewrites a regulation first drafted in 1979, and settles a dispute between the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and state over what exactly constitutes an exemption.

Previously, any industry that successfully defended an emissions event was not required to seek a permit and would not be in violation of air pollution limits even if exceeded. The EPA viewed this policy as an automatic skirting of the law.

Last year, 7,520 emission events occurred in the state, 60 percent of which were upsets, or unplanned bursts of pollution. Nearly 30 percent of all the events occurred in the Houston region, releasing 36.7 millions of pounds of pollution in a region struggling to meet the federal ozone standard by 2007

-Houston Chronicle

January Calendar

For the most complete and current listing of environmental happenings in the Houston-Galveston region, visit CEC's web site at www.cechouston.org and click on Calendar.

Sat, Jan 4

Crape Myrtles

Where: Mercer Arboretum

When: 9-11 am

Contact: (281) 443-8731

Fee: Free

Backyard Orchard 2 - Peaches, Plums, Pomegranates, & Other Fruit

Where: Urban Harvest, 1900 Kane

When: 9:30 am-12 noon

Contact: (713) 880-5540

Fee: \$10 for member, \$20 for non-member

Mon, Jan 6

Ornithology Group Meeting

Where: Bayland Community Center,

6400 Bissonnet

When: 7:00 pm

Contact: Skip Almoney at (713)524-4285

Fee: Free

Wed, Jan 8

Audubon Society Membership Meeting

Where: Cullen Hall, University of St. Thomas

When: 7:30 pm

Contact: (713)-932-1639

Fee: Free

Lunch Bunch: Texas Trees

Where: Mercer Arboretum

When: 12 noon-1 pm

Contact: (281) 443-8731

Fee: Free

Thu, Jan 9

Backyard Orchard 3 - Care of Fruit Trees

Where: Urban Harvest, 1900 Kane

When: 6:30-8:30 pm

Contact: (713) 880-5540

Fee: \$10 for member, \$20 for non-member

Fri, Jan 10 or Sat, Jan 11

Here Kitty, Kitty (For ages 2 1/2-3 + an adult).

Where: Houston Zoo

When: 9:30-10:30 am or 11 am-12 pm

Contact: (713)-533-6550

Fee: \$6 for member, \$8.50 for non-member

Sat, Jan 11

Under the Sea (For ages 5-9 + an adult)

Where: Houston Museum of Natural Science

When: 9:15-11:30 am

Contact: (713)-639-4629

Fee: \$15 for members, \$25 for non-members

Naturalist Explorers Class(ages 5-12)

Where: Houston Arboretum & Nature Center

When: 9 am-12 noon

Contact: (713) 681-8433

Fee: \$9 for member, \$15 for non-member

Project Wild Aquatic Educator Workshop

Where: Armand Bayou Nature Center

When: 9 am-4 pm

Contact: (281) 474-2551

Fee: \$15; Pre-registration required

Garden Tour: Winter Tree Identification

Where: Mercer Arboretum

When: 9-11 am

Contact: (281) 443-8731

Fee: Free

Backyard Orchard 5 Apples, Pears, Persimmons

Where: Urban Harvest, 1900 Kane

When: 9:30 am-12 pm

Contact: (713) 880-5540

Fee: \$10 for member, \$20 for non-member

Mon, Jan 13

How to Start a Community Garden

Where: Urban Harvest, 1900 Kane

When: 4-6:30 pm

Contact: (713) 880-5540

Fee: Free; Pre-registration required

Tue, Jan 14-Thu, Jan 16

Galveston Bay Estuary Program Sixth Biennial State of the Bay Symposium

Where: South Shore Harbour Resort and Conference Center, League City, TX

When: Contact for details

Contact: Scott Jones at (281) 316-3007

Fee: Free

Wed, Jan 15

Permaculture: Gardening for Sustainable Texas

Where: 3015 Richmond

When: 7-9 pm

Contact: Urban Harvest at (713) 880-5540

Fee: Free, Pre-registration required

Fri, Jan 17

Audubon Docent Guild Owl Prowl

Where: Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary

When: 7 pm

Contact: (713) 464-4900

Fee: \$5; Reservations required

Sat, Jan 18

Underwater Wonders Educator Workshop

Where: Moody Gardens, 1 Hope Blvd., Galveston, TX

When: 9 am-4 pm

Contact: 1-800-582-4673, ext. 4231

Fee: \$35 (lunch included)

Bugs in Disguise (For ages 5-9 + an adult)

Where: HMNS, Cockrell Butterfly Center

When: 8:45-11:30 am

Contact: (713) 639-4629

Fee: \$15 for members, \$25 for non-members

Rockin' Raptors (For ages Pre-K - 5th grade).

Where: Houston Zoo

When: Contact for details

Contact: (713) 533-6550

Fee: \$12

Urban Harvest 2003 Fruit Tree Sale

Where: Urban Harvest, 1900 Kane

When: 9 am-2 pm Sale; 8 am Lecture

Contact: (713) 880-5540

Fee: Free; bring money to buy trees

GBCPA Saving the Texas Coast

Where: Houston Yacht Club, 3620 Miramar

When: 5 pm-7 pm

Contact: (281) 326-3343

Fee: Free

Mon, Jan 20

How to Start a Community Garden

Where: Urban Harvest, 1900 Kane

When: 1-3:30 pm

Contact: (713) 880-5540

Fee: Free; Pre-registration required

Tue, Jan 21

Houston Audubon Society Sanctuary Seminar

Where: Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary

When: 7:15 pm

Contact: 713-932-1639

Fee: \$5 donation; reservations requested

Naturalist Certification

Where: Houston Arboretum & Nature Center

When: 7-9 pm

Contact: (713) 681-8433

Fee: \$15 for member, \$20 for non-member

Tomatoes

Where: Urban Harvest, 1900 Kane

When: 6:15-8:15

Contact: (713) 880-5540

Fee: \$10 for member, \$20 for non-member

Fri, Jan 24 or Sat, Jan 25
or Mon, Jan 27

Tadpole Troopers - From Acorn to Log

Where: Houston Arboretum & Nature Center

When: Contact for details

Contact: (713) 681-8433

Fee: \$6 for member, \$10 for non-member

Sat, Jan 25

Arbor Day Celebration

Where: Mercer Arboretum

When: 9 am-12 noon

Contact: (281) 43-8731

Fee: Free

Sat, Wed 29

Rice Design Alliance Lecture-Swiss Made

Where: Brown Auditorium, MFA Houston

When: 7 pm

Contact: (713) 348-4876

Fee: Contact for details

Regular Meetings

Meetings are monthly unless otherwise indicated.

Call to verify before attending a meeting. To list meetings, call 713-524-4CEC or fax 713-524-3311.

American Institute of Architects Environmental Committee 2nd Tues at noon. AIA office 3000 Richmond, Ste 500. 713-520-0155.

American Institute of Chemical Engineers 1st Thurs, Sheraton Astrodome, 610 Loop S. & Kirby Matthew Kolodney, 713-767-3752.

American Planning Assoc. 1st Tues, 11:45 am, The Court at St. James Place. Bret Keast 713-785-0080.

Bayou Preservation Assoc. 2nd Monday of Jan, March, May, Sept & Nov, at the Houston Arboretum, 713-529-6443. PLease RSVP.

BikeHouston last Tues, 6:30 pm, 3015 Richmond 713-652-2555.

Citizens' Environmental Coalition Board meeting 1st Tues, 6 pm, Houston Environmental Center, 3015 Richmond. 713-524-4CEC.

Cypress Creek Flood Control Coalition 3rd Weds, 7:30 pm, Lakewood Forest Utility District Office, 14223 Lakewood Forest Drive Map is on web site at www.ccfcc.org (281) 469-5161

Electric Auto Association, Houston Chapter. 3rd Thurs, 6:30 pm, HEC 3015 Richmond, Suite 280. Ben Chamberlin, 713-975-7744.

Environmental Educator's Exchange 1st Wed of Feb, May, Aug, Nov, 5 pm. Sites vary. Kelly Drinnen, 409-683-4233.

Friends of Texas Wildlife, 2nd Sat, 10 am, Samuel Matthew Park, 1728 E. Hufsmith Road, Tomball, 281-255-8885 or Lynda Guertin, cell 713-825-4095.

Galveston Bay Estuary Program Quarterly. Call for specific dates: 281-332-9937.

Galveston-Houston Assoc. For Smog Prevention (GHASP) 3rd Thurs, 7:30 pm, 3126 Fairhope. Ron Parry, 713-669-1195.

Greater Houston Preservation Alliance, Monthly walking tours, 4th Sun, 2 pm. Historic Neighborhoods Council Meeting, last Sat. Call 713-216-5000 or visit www.ghpa.org for times and locations.

Green Party 3rd Mon, Montrose Public Library 4100 Montrose. 713-866-6285 or 713-880-3219.

Gulf Coast Institute: Houston/Gulf Coast Smart Growth Initiative 4th Wed, monthly at 11:30 am, H-GAC, 3555 Timmons, 2nd floor. 713-523-5757.

Harris County Soil & Water Conservation District 1st Wed, 9 am. Bennie Billington, 713-855-8716.

HART - the Houston Animal Rights Team 1st and 3rd Thurs, 7pm, University of St. Thomas 2nd floor, Crooker Center (the student cafeteria) 713-527-9144 .

Historic Neighborhoods Council 1st Sun, 10:30 am, Heights Branch Library. Ramona Davis 713-216-5000.

Houston Arboretum & Nature Center 3rd Wed, 5:45 pm, Houston Arboretum. 713-681-8433.

Houston Archeological Society 2nd Fri, 7:30 pm, M.D. Anderson Hall, Univ. of St. Thomas. Tommy Nuckols, 713-664-8369.

Houston Audubon Society 2nd Wed, Sept-May. 7 pm, University of St. Thomas, Cullen Hall.

713-932-1639.

Houston Bicycle Club, Inc 2nd Tues, except May. 7 pm, Tracy Gee Community Center, 3599 Westcenter Drive. 713-935-2810.

Houston Canoe Club Gen Mtg 2nd Wed, 7 pm, Red Cross Building, 2700 Southwest Frwy. Social Mtg 4th Wed, 7 pm Jax Grill, 1613 Shepherd. 713-467-8857.

Houston Homeowners Assoc 4th Mon (except November, Aug, and Dec), 5:30 pm, First Presbyterian, 5300 S. Main. Michael O'Brian, 281-496-0752.

Houston Renewable Energy Group Last Sunday of Jan, April, July, Oct., 2-4 pm, TSU School of Technology, Room 225. 713-524-2492.

Katy Prairie Conservancy 2nd Tues, 5:30 pm, Houston Environmental Center, 3015 Richmond, Suite 280. 713-523-6135.

Keep Houston Beautiful Quarterly meetings at 2700 Post Oak Blvd., Ste. 1728. 713-621-7020.

Legacy Land Trust 3rd Wed, 6 pm, Houston Environmental Center, 3015 Richmond, Suite 280. 713-524-2100.

League of Women Voters of Houston 2nd Thurs or Fri. 713-784-2923.

Mothers for Clean Air Quarterly. Call Jane Laping 713-526-0110.

Nature Discovery Center of Friends of Bellaire Parks 3rd Mon, 7 pm, Nature Discovery Center, 7112 Newcastle. 713-667-6550.

Native Plant Society of Texas 3rd Thurs (except Dec, Jan), 7pm, Houston Arboretum, 4501 Woodway, 713-431-6346.

Outdoor Nature Club 2nd Thurs, Sept-May. 7:30 pm (social begins at 7), Bayland Community Center, 6400 Bissonnet. 281-358-5407.

Piney Woods Wildlife Society 3rd Tues, 7:30 pm, Mercer Arboretum, 22306 Aldine Westfield Rd. 713-955-6667.

Sierra Club 1st Thur, 7:30 pm, Central Presbyterian, 3788 Richmond @ Timmons. 713-895-9309.

Texas Association of Environmental Professionals 3rd Thurs, 11:30 am, Brady's Landing, 8505 Cypress; Reservations: www.taep.org, reservation@taep.org, or 713-629-9119.

Urban Harvest Community Gardens Quarterly Meeting 4th Tuesday in January, April, July, 6-8 pm; Organic Gardening Classes weekly; workshops for outdoor classroom teachers annually summers. 1900 Kane. 713-880-5540.

Vegetarian Society of Houston 4th Wed, dinner mtg. at various local restaurants. 713-880-1055; Outreach volunteers call 713-880-1055.

White Oak Bayou Assoc 2nd Wed, 7:30 pm, Heights Fire House, 12th & Yale. For agenda, Fred Lazare, President, 713-864-9416 or Teresa Matlock, Treasurer, 713-864-3008.

Wildlife Rehab & Education Central/West: Carol at 713-661-5038 date and times. South/East: 2nd Wed 7 pm Sharon, 281-332-8319.

The Woodlands GREEN Quarterly at WCSC, 8203 Millennium Forest Drive. Christina West, 281-291-5876.

Thicket

Continued from page 3

said there is still cause for concern. "It still boils down to taking a toxic substance and transporting it across a sensitive area. . . (and) there is evidence that ground water can be contaminated up to 100 miles away."

Hutter defended the NPS saying stringent environmental assessments and extensive public comment periods are conducted for every project. But he admitted that public input carries little weight because the government does not own mineral rights to oil and gas below the national forest. Texas mineral law provides the government can only regulate what happens on the surface and cannot deny private owners access to what lies beneath.

"It would take a substantial controversy to delay the project," Hutter said.

That is a cause for concern, according to Houston Sierra Club's forestry chairman Brandt Mannchen. Mannchen complained that he was notified of the seismic exploration proposal in November, one month before the comment period began but three months after the project had already started.

Mannchen objected to what he sees as the priority given to oil and gas companies under the Bush administration, saying the NPS has, within recent years, been interpreting regulations designed to protect public lands, in a way that makes it easier for exploration and drilling.

He said he also hopes to raise public awareness of the potential costs of drilling compared with the small benefits. For example, the environmental assessment on the Omni project estimated the potential oil underneath Big Thicket would fuel the United States for three hours. The report found the Thicket's natural gas supply would fuel the country for one day.

"It takes a lot of time effort and money for the park service to monitor gas activities when instead they should be protecting plants and animals and studying nature and providing educational tours for the public."

Mannchen said.

Environmentalists and parks service officials did agree on one thing. Both sides said perhaps the only way to permanently prevent drilling on Big Thicket, would be for the federal government to purchase rights to the oil and gas beneath it.

Beach

Continued from page 1

prohibits private structures on public beaches.

According to the office of Attorney General Greg Abbot, more than 100 private structures currently occupy public beach space in Galveston. TOBA members want the state to enforce the law and prevent the city from allowing further development. TOBA president Tim Lopas said his group will appeal to the General Land Office, which must approve the city's access plan before it becomes law. If the plan is approved, the group may take the city to court.

GLO spokesman Jim Suydam said there are no black and white answers when it comes to beach management. He said, though it was true driving causes erosion, the problem could be addressed by enforcing existing laws without further limiting access. "We will be reviewing the plan to make sure it strikes a balance protecting the eco-systems and citizens rights to access," he said.

After the GLO reviews and makes recommendations, the plan will be sent back to Galveston's planning commission and city council for more public hearings before final adoption.

Citizens' Environmental Coalition

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