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Please consider for print this modified version of a Commentary that was originally published by the Austin American Statesman on April 12, 2013. The author, Karen Huber is a former Travis County Commissioner and active member of the Hill Country Alliance (HCA) Water Team.

Contact:

Karen Huber
512.797.9028

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Christy Muse, Executive Director
Hill Country Alliance (christy@hillcountryalliance.org)
www.HillCountryAlliance.org
512.560.3135

Don't let short-term interests steal future prosperity

By Karen Huber, Local Contributor

It's not about the birds; "it's about the economy, folks!" It's about our "habitat" — the health of the human race not just that of the whooping cranes. The recent federal court ruling, faulting the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality in the deaths of 23 endangered whooping cranes, directly relates to maintaining prosperity. The judge ruled that the agency has a statutory obligation to ensure enough fresh water flows downriver to the coast to provide viable habitat for critters like blue crabs, which sustain the whooping cranes – and ultimately us.

Fresh water mixing with salt water in the estuaries of the Gulf Coast provides "brackish" water needed to maintain nurseries for most gulf and ocean seafood. You can bet that if your favorite seafood doesn't breed in brackish water, it eats something that does. In fact, 97 percent of the Gulf of Mexico commercial seafood landings rely on estuaries and wetlands to survive.

So why are elected officials such as Attorney General Greg Abbott and Gov. Rick Perry's former TCEQ appointee Kathleen Hartnett White screaming foul over the rulings? Perhaps "the best defense is a good offense." The commission is responsible for administering most environmental rules and regulations. Yet Abbott said TCEQ was not at fault because the Austin headquarters was too far removed from the realities of crane habitat to draw the link. Really? That is the agency's job. What actually is at stake is a political desire to promote business — at any cost.

Create jobs, sure, but not at the expense of existing jobs and certainly not at the expense of an entire region's economic health.

The food chain from Texas bays and estuaries generates more than \$1 billion annually, including recreational fishing and nature tourism — the fastest-growing segment of Texas' tourism industry. And, a 1997 study concluded healthy estuaries result in an overall economic value rendered at \$11,000 per acre per year, putting the annual value of San Antonio Bay alone (the whooping cranes' home) at more than \$1.3 billion.

Political sorts screaming “We can't let birds take priority over human needs” just doesn't hold water. So take note, voters. Without understanding that sustainable life for the human species relies in no small part on healthy rivers, oceans and sea life, we may be letting short-term interests trump long-term prosperity.

Even more political is Abbott's criticism that the judge's ruling prevents water reserved for environmental purposes from being permitted for other uses. That charge is superficial. The law sets out provisions for critical environmental flows, and in the current drought there simply is not enough water for all those who want it. The judge appears to be trying to put some “teeth” into an issue whose resolution has languished for years. So, the issue gets dammed up in a legal mess including archaic laws regarding priority water rights and other conflicting rules and regulations by the plethora of water policymaking entities.

So what does a bird's-eye view of this mess offer? Those joining TCEQ in the lawsuit included big biz like the chemical industry and river authorities representing regional interests who want more residential and industrial growth. Water for residential use is needed, but an important part of that equation is that the greatest percentage of residential water use is for landscaping. What is more important, high-water-demand St. Augustine lawns or healthy bird habitat that translates into healthy estuaries and oceans?”

Don't be fooled by political rhetoric bemoaning birds as more important than people. It's really all about people and a prosperous future. Second, water policymaking in Texas is hugely fragmented and needs to be streamlined. Checks and balances should ensure that existing economies and jobs are not put at risk because one set of competing water interests cries “foul” and blames the “fowls” or environmentalists without regard to the bigger picture and the true economic impacts. While a Travis County commissioner, I championed the economics of Central Texas' water needs, and we must consider similar economic priorities on the Gulf end of river systems. Third, a healthy economy is directly tied to the prudent use of our natural resources and how to best manage those for now and the future.

Texas has a water crisis and understanding possible solutions requires voters to look beyond the faucets, the political rhetoric and regionalism and work with local and state interests for balanced solutions that work for all. If “Peter is robbed to pay Paul,” we all lose.

Huber is an advocate for sustainable and fair water policy. She is a former Travis County Commissioner and currently serves on the Texas A & M Sea Grant Program Advisory Committee. Karen is an active member of the Hill Country Alliance Water Team, a diverse group of science and policy experts collaborating on Hill Country water issues.

Hill Country Alliance is a non-profit organization whose purpose is to raise public awareness and build community support around the need to preserve the natural resources and heritage of the Central Texas Hill Country. To learn more about Hill Country Alliance initiatives, please visit the HCA website www.hillcountryalliance.org

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