

By Lonnie Moore, Vice President, Protect Lake Travis Association

An argument for the TCEQ 'no-discharge' rule

There is nothing like a long, serious drought to make us really appreciate the wonderful asset that is Lake Travis. And while we all worry about when the rains and water will return, there is one thing we have not had to worry about in a very long time – the threat of pollution in the form of sewage effluent discharged into Lake Travis and upstream.

In the early 1980's, the State of Texas implemented a series of rules restricting discharge of sewage effluent into the six Highland Lakes. The Protect Lake Travis Association was involved in getting these rules passed by bringing public and government attention to the negative effects of effluent discharges into natural bodies of water.

Recently a number of wastewater service providers have begun a petition and a public relations campaign to persuade the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality that the current restrictions on discharging sewage effluent should be relaxed or eliminated. As part of their campaign, they argue that: 1) sewage effluent discharges would improve the lake levels, 2) that wastewater treatment processes have improved so that effluent discharges would not be harmful, and 3) that land-based disposal of effluent is both costly and wasteful.

PLTA adamantly rejects the premise of the petitioners that the current rules restricting sewage effluent discharge into our lakes should be changed. These rules have been fundamental to keeping our Highland Lakes, including Lake Travis, as clean and healthy as they are today. There are better solutions to dealing with the byproducts of sewage treatment than discharging them into the lakes that we depend on for safe drinking water supply, recreation, tourism and quality of life.

It is not possible in this small space to explain all of the negative effects of discharging effluent into our lakes or to detail the many technical, operational and cost issues involved in trying to consistently achieve and guarantee a truly "safe" quality of effluent. We would rather use this opportunity to point out a better way and offer to help.

Done correctly, land-based irrigation with treated effluent is a beneficial reuse that reduces the amount of water needed to be drawn from the Highland Lakes. Coupled with water conservation, this beneficial reuse of the water supply is the best way to have a positive

effect on lake levels and is much more environment-friendly than direct discharge of effluent. A large number of entities are already doing this, including Lakeway MUD, and more are beginning to do so throughout the country.

We are not talking about “irrigating cedar trees”, the example often given by the petitioners. That is indeed a safe but wasteful disposal method and we should be moving beyond it to using effluent in lieu of potable water for commercial and residential landscapes, crops and even industrial uses. PLTA is aware that changes in regulations and changes in public perception would aid the transition to widespread beneficial reuse of effluent. We would like to help any MUD or city to pursue this option, while continuing to strongly oppose any attempt to allow effluent discharge into our precious lakes.