

Watermaster Evaluation Fact Sheet - 2013

Background

On May 28, 2011, the Texas Legislature adopted the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) Sunset legislation, House Bill 2694, which includes a requirement for the TCEQ to evaluate and issue a report for all river and coastal basins that do not have a watermaster. The report will assess whether or not there is a need to appoint a watermaster. This evaluation is required at least once every five years, and the TCEQ developed a schedule to consider several basins each year. During 2012, the TCEQ evaluated the Brazos River Basin, the Brazos-Colorado Coastal Basin, the Colorado River Basin, and the Colorado-Lavaca Coastal Basin. For 2013, TCEQ will evaluate the Trinity River Basin, the Trinity-San Jacinto Coastal Basin, the San Jacinto River Basin, and the San Jacinto-Brazos Coastal Basin.

What is a Watermaster Program?

Watermaster programs manage surface water and operate from field offices within their designated basin(s) performing the following functions:

- ❖ A watermaster continuously monitors streamflows, reservoir levels, and water use within a basin.
- ❖ As needed, holders of impoundment rights may notify the watermaster when they plan to release sold water. The watermaster can then monitor usage downstream to ensure that the released water reaches the buyer.
- ❖ Before starting their pumps, opening their sluice gates, or starting to divert water in any other way, all water right holders must notify the watermaster and state how much water they plan to divert.
- ❖ The watermaster determines whether a diversion will remove water that rightfully belongs to another user and could notify the user with lower priority to reduce or stop pumping if needed.
- ❖ When streamflows diminish, the watermaster allocates available water among the water right holders according to each user's priority date.
- ❖ If a water-right holder does not comply with the water right or with TCEQ rules, the executive director may direct a watermaster to adjust the control works, including pumps, to prevent the owner from diverting, taking, storing, or distributing water until the water right holder complies. Additionally, a watermaster may take more formal action such as a Notice of Violation, Notice of Enforcement, or Field Citation, which could generate assessed penalties.

There are currently three watermaster programs in Texas. The Rio Grande Watermaster coordinates releases from the Amistad and Falcon reservoir system for irrigation, municipal, and industrial uses. The South Texas Watermaster serves the Nueces, San Antonio, Guadalupe, and Lavaca river basins, as well as the adjacent coastal basins. The Concho Watermaster, currently a division of the South Texas Watermaster, serves the Concho River segment of the Colorado River Basin.

Advantages of a Watermaster Program.

TCEQ watermasters can provide valuable services to the water users in the basins they oversee. In addition to their monitoring of river conditions:

- ❖ Watermasters can coordinate diversions in the basin, ensuring that all water users get the best overall value from the water available to them.
- ❖ With their real-time monitoring of local streamflows, watermasters can quickly identify and stop illegal diversions.
- ❖ Watermasters may be able to anticipate a shortage before it reaches the crisis point, thus enabling local users to work together to develop a strategy that will meet everyone's most basic needs.
- ❖ When disputes arise among water users, the watermaster can often help the users settle the matter, thereby avoiding costly litigation.
- ❖ Watermasters can provide valuable technical assistance.
- ❖ A watermaster program affords a long-term solution for managing water rights in a river basin.

Program Costs and Fees.

According to state law, permitted water-right holders in a watermaster area must pay the costs associated with a watermaster program through an annual fee. Certain domestic and livestock uses are exempted by law from water rights permitting and therefore any fees associated with the watermaster program.

The total amount assessed per water right holder is comprised of both a base fee charged on each account and an annual fee based on the volume of water that may be diverted for each authorized use. The current base fee is \$50 per account and generally does not change from year to year. The use fee is calculated each year and is based on the proposed operating budget for each watermaster program.

In addition to the cost of the watermaster program itself, most users will be required to add a meter to their pumps. Depending on the specific technology, a meter may cost \$400 or more. However, metering may lead to enough of a savings in pumping costs to offset the cost of the meter. In other words, the user might find that he or she had been running the unmetered pumps longer than it took to get the needed volume of water.

Participating in the Process

We encourage input on this evaluation process. If you are interested in the evaluation of the Trinity River Basin, Trinity-San Jacinto Coastal Basin, San Jacinto River Basin, San Jacinto-Brazos Coastal Basin, or if you have any questions on this process, please contact us:

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Web Site: www.tceq.texas.gov/goto/watermaster