



## Governments

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# Water Quality Assessment to Undergo Upgrade

The TCEQ begins revising the way it collects and uses data for evaluating water quality. The outcome will affect the 2006 assessment of water bodies around the state.

## The TCEQ calls on stakeholders to help revamp program

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Every two years, the TCEQ is required by the federal Clean Water Act to evaluate the quality of surface waters in Texas. The process determines whether the lakes, bays, and streams are clean enough for designated uses such as a drinking water source, swimming, fishing, or aquatic habitat.

Bodies of water found to be impaired for one or more of these uses are identified and targeted for remedial action. The TCEQ then proposes pollution cleanup and management plans, such as total maximum daily load (TMDL) projects to determine the specific amount of pollutant a water body can receive and still meet its water quality standards.

The biennial water quality assessment plays an important role in how the state's resources are allocated for environmental management—for example, planning which rivers and streams should be monitored intensively over the next two years and where to direct TMDLs and nonpoint source grants.

In 2004, the TCEQ began revising the way it measures and reports the status of water quality. Stakeholders have been consulted at every step in the project. The goal is to make the TCEQ's evaluations more accurate by taking advantage of newer monitoring technologies and better statistical methods.

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## Stakeholder Input

The current methods of assessing water quality have been in place since 2000. The revisions under review will govern how the TCEQ decides from 2006 to 2010 which waters are clean or impaired.

The agency has held a series of meetings with 24 stakeholders representing various interest groups—other state agencies, environmental groups, industry, river authorities, cities, and environmental engineering firms. The stakeholders were briefed on the possible changes and the effects on overall management of water quality; then they prioritized the issues under review.

On the proposed adoption of better statistical methods for evaluating when a water body is polluted, the stakeholders agreed on improved methods for collecting certain kinds of samples, for choosing the location of sampling sites, and for evaluating the data. They emphasized the need to extract more information from available data, such as the severity of a particular impairment.

Another important issue was the development of criteria for measuring the attainment of narrative standards—the more subjective measurements concerned with matters such as how water looks or smells, or whether it is toxic to fish.

In addition, the stakeholders addressed the 2006 assessment, recommending ways to better communicate the results to the public, and discussing management strategies to protect or restore water quality.

Another concern was the resources available to monitor the state's rivers. Texas monitors about 20,000 river miles, or 11 percent of the total river miles. The TCEQ has examined a statistical approach that would provide a valid representation of the statewide status of water quality using current monitoring resources. This might be accomplished by altering the location and timing of monitoring stations. While the stakeholders agreed the approach is valid, they do not want to reduce the routine monitoring of rivers.

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## Importance of Data

Water quality is of interest to all Texans. Those who fish or swim want to know their favorite water body is safe for that purpose. Communities relying on a sole source of drinking water need updates on the condition of those waters. Industry has a vested interest, too. When a water body is designated as impaired, a facility may not be able to amend permits for discharges into that water body, or to acquire permits for new facilities if the discharge makes the problem worse.

While the state is not able to monitor all water bodies, the TCEQ does regularly assess those with the greatest value for drinking water, recreation,

aquatic life, and the economy.

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Last Modified Mon, 18 Jul 2011  
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