The TCEQ Clean Rivers Program
Video Transcript

Water, it is the most important natural resource on our planet. It's in the ground, air, ocean, and in every living creature.

In Texas, we're fortunate to have an abundance of water. From ground aquifer systems to powerful rivers that shape our state's scenery.

Texas has 23 major river basins and over 700 rivers, lakes, and other bodies of water. Together, this water flows some 125,000 miles into more than 50 bays and estuaries, eventually finding its way to the Gulf of Mexico.

But water quantity and quality are starting to struggle under the demands of Texas' fast growing population. There are 22 million Texans who already live here. By 2025, our population is projected to increase to 30 million and by 2040, to over 36 million.

One way Texas is addressing these concerns is through a unique program that's working to ensure clean water for now and for our future. The Clean Rivers Program. In 1991, the Texas Legislature passed the Clean Rivers Act in response to concerns about water quality and the public's lack of input into the decision-making process about local water issues. This legislation laid the groundwork for an innovative, state-wide water quality monitoring program. The program would rely on public involvement to help define and direct its efforts. With this priority, the Clean Rivers Program, or CRP, was created. To oversee the program, the legislature chose the state's environmental agency, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. With almost 3,000 employees and a network of 16 regional offices, the TCEQ's mission is to protect our state's human and natural resources and maintain clean air and water.

The Clean Rivers Program goal is to protect and maintain water resources and also to improve the quality of water in each Texas river and coastal basin, helping to ensure a safe and healthy environment. Understanding that these goals could not be accomplished alone, partnerships were established with 15 of the state's leading water resource agencies. With each agency responsible for implementing CRP in their own river and coastal basins. Through this partner network, Clean Rivers has developed a coordinated system of statewide specialists and scientists to monitor, sample, and evaluate local water quality. The partners then communicate those results to state and local decision makers, as well as the general public. The Clean Rivers Program also relies on input from stakeholders. Stakeholders are citizen volunteers and representatives from government, business, and industry who help guide the program in setting water quality planning priorities within each basin.

Funded primarily by fees that Texans pay for water and wastewater services, the program operates today with the same five million dollar annual budget set by the legislature in 1991. But the program has managed to grow. Over the years Clean Rivers Partners have significantly increased investment of their own resources to support and expand monitoring, and to address stakeholder concerns. After seeing the benefits of the program first hand, other basin stakeholders including local governments and industry have begun contributing data and monitoring resources as well. All together, these in-kind activities provide almost two million dollars' worth of additional program support each year.

While the success and accomplishments of the program are the direct results of the commitment, cooperation, and hard work of all the Clean Rivers Partners and their basin stakeholders, the situation

used to be quite different. The Clean Rivers Program was introduced at a time when water quality monitoring by local agencies was often minimal and while the Clean Rivers partners were experts in their own watersheds and understood local issues, there were still many locations around the state with little or no monitoring at all. Those agencies that did monitor did so based on individual priorities which often resulted in inconsistencies. Coordination of efforts was almost non-existent because there was no effective way to communicate priorities or share information. With the introduction of Clean Rivers, all of that changed.

A stringent set of protocols was introduced to produce consistent, reliable, and comparable water quality data. Monitoring practices were standardized and guidance adopted to insure that the results were not biased by seasons, locations, unusual weather, or artificial influences.

Water samples are sent only to certified, in-house, or commercial laboratories for analysis using state of the art equipment and following EPA approved methods. Results are verified and validated by the partners to ensure quality assurance standards have been met.

In order to maximize the monitoring that partners can perform, each spring all CRP and TCEQ sampling teams within a basin meet to develop a comprehensive monitoring plan for the coming year.

The results of the local meetings are integrated into a statewide Coordinated Monitoring Schedule. The freely accessible internet based schedule features an interactive data base of more than 1,700 sites monitored by nearly 50 participating Texas agencies that contribute data to TCEQ.

This improved efficiency, combined with data contributed by basin stakeholders, has resulted in a 3 to 400 percent increase in monitoring by CRP partners since the program began. Today, more than 1,000 statewide locations including streams, creeks, rivers, lakes, and bays are sampled by water quality specialists on at least a quarterly basis, producing more than 250,000 water quality measurements each year. All this consistently collected and comparable data is provided to the TCEQ for inclusion in the statewide water quality database.

And of all the data that TCEQ uses to make decisions about the conditions of our state's surface waters, more than 60 percent is provided by Clean Rivers Program partners. Data is the key element to this success, data and lots of it. Data makes it possible to develop a comprehensive picture of the hundreds of water bodies in our 23 basins and is fundamental in determining and addressing current and potential water quality problems

Local agencies use the data to establish water quality baselines so that they can detect changes. As the local entity, they are much more in tune to the water quality changes as they occur. If problems are detected, local agencies can focus their resources on conducting special studies to determine the extent of the problem.

The TCEQ evaluates the data to determine if state water quality standards are being met and that recreation, fishing, aquatic life, and human health uses are maintained. Every other year, the TCEQ reports these findings to the citizens of Texas and to the Environmental Protection Agency as part of the Texas Water Quality Inventory. When the TCEQ identifies a water quality problem or when stakeholders raise a specific concern, special studies may be initiated. Special studies can be conducted to identify sources of concern and help define a problem more thoroughly. In some instances it may be determined that a problem no longer exists.

The benefits of this approach have been far reaching. Knowledge of water quality in Texas is more comprehensive than it's ever been and with this better understanding, improvements in water quality can and are being pursued. But, decisions on how to best address water quality issues cannot be sensibly made without the involvement and consideration of the citizens and stakeholders will be most affected. That's why the Clean Rivers Program established a forum for sharing water quality information with stakeholders and obtaining input on their concerns. This aspect is integral to the success of the program.

This forum has proven to be unrivaled in its ability to create rapport between diverse stakeholders and build true partnerships that work for the common goal of clean water. The stakeholders who participate in each partner's steering committee represent a variety of interests including: environmental groups, citizens, agriculture, government, business, and industry. Committees meet at least annually, and all basin stakeholders are invited to participate. The meetings provide the opportunity for ideas to be contributed and local concerns addressed. Through this dialogue and consensus building the committee aids the Clean Rivers Program in setting priorities and achieving solutions. While these priorities can be very specific to individual basins, they can also be common to broad areas of the state, for example, elevated bacteria levels and low dissolved oxygen concerns are found in nearly every basin. Stakeholders have helped bring these concerns to the forefront and are actively working with CRP partners and the TCEQ to address them. Steering committees also provide the opportunity for input regarding the Coordinated Monitoring Schedule. Water quality objectives and priorities and even allocation of CRP resources to improve the ability of the public to gain access to detailed information regarding CRP activities, each of the CRP partner agencies maintains an informative website. Each partner's site provides access to local information and reports with links to the TCEQ's water quality inventory, a Coordinated Monitoring Schedule, water quality data, and other information and opportunities.

Because participation in the process is essential to this program's continued success local CRP partners are continually looking for people and organizations to get involved and provide input about water quality priorities. So, if you know about specific water quality problems or have concerns about a stream or watershed, please contact your local CRP partner or attend a Steering Committee Meeting.

The Clean Rivers Program is an excellent example of the best possible partnership between state and local entities working together to protect and save our precious water resources. We're already improving water monitoring protocols; coordinating monitoring efforts; identifying, preventing, and reducing pollution; involving stakeholders; and reaching out to the general public.

But we all have a part to play to create clean water in Texas. Now is the perfect time for every Texan to step up and ask: what can I do to improve water quality? To share your ideas, learn more, and get involved, keep watching for information on how to contact your local Clean Rivers Program partner agency.