

Mines leave San Jacinto River up a creek

Sediment renders channel among most at risk in U.S., group says

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By RANDY LEE LOFTIS / The Dallas Morning News

Texas' San Jacinto River is among the nation's 10 most-endangered rivers, the result of extensive sand mining in its watershed, a conservation group said in a report to be released today.

Sediment from mining, made worse by forest and wetland destruction that removes natural protections, is threatening the entire ecosystem that the San Jacinto supports, American Rivers said in its annual report on rivers at risk.

"Politicians here may not care for the laws of physics, but water runs downhill, even in Texas," American Rivers president Rebecca Wodder said in a statement. "It's time for the state to recognize that fact and have a say in these unregulated sand mines that are fouling the San Jacinto for people downstream."

The San Jacinto rises near Huntsville and drains into Galveston Bay.

Texas and federal regulations that are supposed to protect rivers from sand mine sediment have not worked, American Rivers said. The group cited a 2004 Texas Commission on Environmental Quality report that found that 47 percent of the sand and gravel mines studied didn't have required water quality permits.

That was the worst permit compliance rate of any type of Texas mining listed in the commission's study.

Two Texas groups, the Legacy Land Trust and the San Jacinto Conservation Coalition, joined with American Rivers in calling for state legislation to tighten rules on sand mines, including requiring for the first time that sand mining companies restore the land after mining. They also urged the federal government to buy 10,000 acres between the San Jacinto River and Spring Creek in southern Montgomery County.

"The amazing, century-old bottomland hardwood trees which make up this critical, vanishing ecosystem need to be protected," land trust executive director Jennifer Lorenz said in a statement.

The state environmental commission's 2004 report on mining's effects on Texas rivers concluded that most mines, even those without permits "had little or no



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enduring impacts on our waterways." The report said state regulators did not need a new mining law, but it laid out a program for tighter enforcement.

The commission enforces mining rules in upland areas. Mines in wetland areas are governed by Army Corps of Engineers wetland rules.

Sand mines need individual permits only if they are releasing industrial wastewater, said John Steib, deputy director of compliance and enforcement for the state environmental commission. Releases of stormwater – rain runoff – are governed by a general statewide permit that sets standard conditions without requiring each facility to get its own permit.

Steve Smith, executive director of the Texas Mining and Reclamation Association, a trade group, said that in his experience most mine operators try to obey the rules. Still, he said, pressure for more regulation was growing.

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