

# Quest for sand and gravel leaves choked water supply

By **MATTHEW TRESAUGUE**  
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

The San Jacinto River, curving through woods only intermittently touched by Houston's sprawl, offers few glimpses of a watershed in distress.

Only from above does a moonscape of eroded land

and denuded forest emerge — the product and proof of vast unregulated sand and gravel mining along the river's two forks, north of Lake Houston.

The mining operations have choked the river with sediment, which clouds the water and later settles in the lake, reducing capacity of a reservoir that fills the taps of millions of people across the region. The silt, which gets worse after a rain, also makes the water more costly for the city of Houston to filter.

For years, though, the problem has drawn little attention because the narrow, slow-moving river is out of sight, with no crossings for 21

*Please see MINING, Page A9*

### INSIDE

Business . . . **B1** ; Directory . . . **A2**  
Comics . . . **D4** ; Editorial . . . **B9**  
Crossword . **D3** ; Horoscopes **D4**



**WE RECYCLE**

### CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1

miles between Interstate 45 and U.S. 59 — a stretch where several sand-mining operations are located.

"Most people don't see this," said Jennifer Lorenz, director of the Bayou Land Conservancy, a nonprofit that preserves land in the San Jacinto's watershed in part to protect water in the reservoir. "This isn't the Brazos River or the Colorado. People are not driving by this."

At the urging of Lorenz and others, state lawmakers are starting to take notice. Sen. Tommy Williams, R-The Woodlands, and Rep. Dan Huberty, R-Kingwood, have filed bills that would require permits to enter and dredge Texas floodplains.

Even if the bills become law, there is no guarantee that the health of the San Jacinto will improve. But supporters say the legislation represents an important first step in regulating the industry.

### Rules are lax in Texas

Texas, which produces more sand and gravel than any other state, allows mine operators to level forests, peel away topsoil and dig without a permit as long as sediment does not enter the river or fill wetlands. They must obtain a state permit only if silty water pours into the river during heavy rains.

The absence of permits for sand mining has made it all but impossible for the state to target bad operators for enforcement.

While some companies operate as stewards of the watershed, others come and go, leaving battered land and dirty water before regulators can catch them.

"We have a problem with rogue operators," Williams said at a recent Senate Natural Resources Committee hearing on his bill. "It's easy to spot them from the air by the silt that flows into the river."

The Texas Aggregates and Concrete Association, an industry group, supports the bills, which would require environmental regulators to inspect mining facilities at least once every three years. Penalties would be as much as \$10,000 per day for each violation.

"As an industry, we want compliance, and we want to promote ourselves as good environmental stewards," said Richard Szecsy, TACA's president.

Without permits, no one knows for certain how many sand mines operate along the San Jacinto. State

chron.com

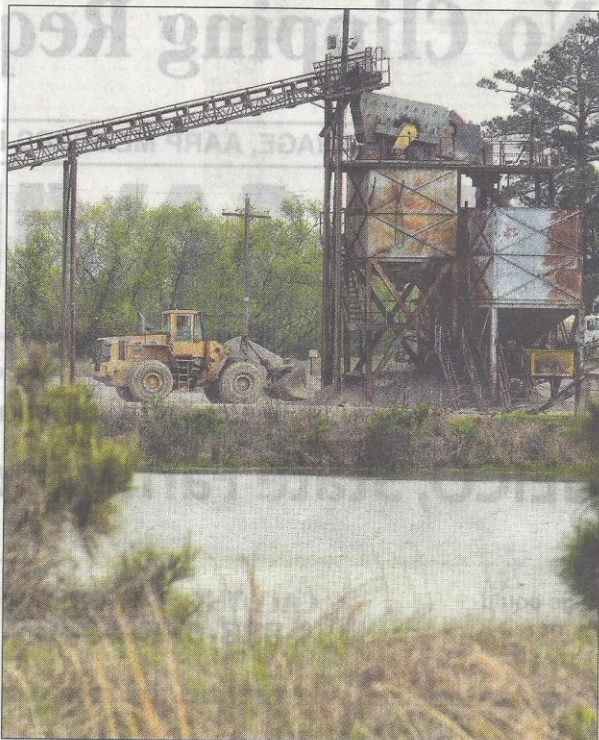
# HOUSTON CHRONICLE

MONDAY, MARCH 28, 2011

\*\*\*

VOL. 110 • NO. 166 • \$1.00

# Bills aim to require dredge permits



CODY DUTY: CHRONICLE

**MINING SAND:** A tractor moves through The Woodlands Plant sand quarry Friday in Conroe. Sand mining along the upper San Jacinto River is affecting water quality.

regulators estimate there are about 20, based on storm water permits and biannual aerial surveys that began two years ago.

Since the aerial surveys began, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality has fined four operators for illegal runoff of storm water in the San Jacinto, the agency said.

Sand mines typically exist behind earthen levees, which can hide them from view at surface level. Some operators build the barriers only high enough to meet the annual water line, but storms can



is too cloudy, leading to the death of grasses that provide spawning habitat

and a key hiding place for fish.

Jeff Henson, a biologist with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, said fish production is low in Lake Houston because of conditions caused by sand and gravel dredging.

### Impact on habitats

Henson has found significant differences in the fish stocks between Lake Houston and Lake Conroe, which is upstream of several mining operations on the west fork of the San Jacinto.

"These areas with high amounts of sediment become like a water desert," Henson said. "The quality of habitat in Lake Houston has declined over 20 years and is getting worse because nothing has changed."

Sand mining has affected about 3,700 of the 13,085 acres, or nearly 30 percent, in the floodplain of the west fork between Interstate 45 and U.S. 59, the Bayou Land Conservancy says. The operations have damaged about 2,400 acres since 1995 alone.

As a result, there are days when the waters of Lake Houston, just north of the FM 1960 bridge, look deceptively inviting to boaters, wide and open before splitting into the two forks of the San Jacinto. But the silt has accumulated to within a foot of the surface, Henson said.

### Expensive water to treat

Lake Houston, 25 miles northeast of downtown, was built in 1954 with a maximum depth of 50 feet. The mean depth is 12 feet, according to the U.S. Geological Survey's data.

Yvonne W. Forrest, senior assistant director of the city's public works department, said the Lake Houston water is among the most expensive for the city to treat. Houston also draws water from Lake Livingston and Lake Conroe and two aquifers.

"We have to remove the particulates" to meet state and federal water quality standards, Forrest said. "If you keep it out of the source of the water, you keep the costs down."

The city is backing the bills in the Legislature — a position that pleases Lorenz, director of the Bayou Land Conservancy. Lorenz wants the city to do more to protect stream banks and buy land in the watershed, but sees its support for the bills as an important first step.

"Let's at least get a grip on what's happening in this area," Lorenz said. "Right now, nobody knows."

matthew.tresaugue@chron.com