

GBRA to supply water to wildlife sanctuary

March 30, 2005
GREG BOWEN
Victoria Advocate

ARANSAS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE - An agreement under which the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority will provide a water supply for an important federal waterfowl preserve near Indianola was signed Monday.

The agreement calls for the river authority, beginning as soon as next fall, to supply water to the Myrtle Foester Whitmire unit of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Aransas National Wildlife Refuge.

The 3,440-acre Whitmire sanctuary provides food, water and shelter for up to 20 percent of the wintering waterfowl that migrate along the Texas coast. The Whitmire unit was added to the 70-year-old, 115,000-acre refuge complex just over a decade ago.

Prior to Monday's agreement-signing ceremonies at the refuge headquarters near Tivoli, Troy Littrell, who manages the refuge, said securing an adequate water supply was "first and foremost" among the challenges facing those charged with operating the Whitmire unit.

"There is no water right for that particular unit," Littrell said. "It's one of the most important wintering waterfowl areas on the Gulf Coast, yet there is no guaranteed water supply for Whitmire."

That problem is remedied under the five-year renewable water-supply contract signed Monday.

"That guarantees us a quality water supply for our waterfowl impoundments," Littrell said.

The water will be used in land and vegetation improvement work, which involves draining and re-flooding the bird habitats.

The agreement also calls for rehabilitating portions of GBRA's Port Lavaca-area canal system, which moves Guadalupe River water to the Whitmire unit and other customers, as well as rehabilitating the Whitmire preserve's canals, which channel water to the bird habitats.

Also planned is a project to map the Whitmire site to plot those locations at which water hyacinth and other non-desirable plants are growing - and then eradicating those plants and replacing them with waterfowl-friendly plants.

"It's a combination of canal system rehab and vegetation management, all targeted at delivering the adequate amount of water for the Whitmire unit," said GBRA general manager Bill West.

That amount has yet been identified.

Littrell said the agreement calls for the exact water needs of the Whitmire unit to be determined.

"Right now we believe that in the worst-case scenario in the driest of years, we're probably looking at about 4,000 acre-feet," Littrell said.

An acre-foot is 325,851 gallons.

In wet years, maybe only 1,500 or 2,000 acre-feet will be needed, he said.

The plan is to use the least amount of water necessary. That will save the refuge money and free up water for the needs of communities and other users along the river.

GBRA will charge USFWS \$26 per acre-foot. The fee will allow GBRA to cover its costs without making a profit or taking a loss.

It was also announced Monday that a \$45,000 federal grant has been received that will be used to begin the work called for under the agreement.

Todd Votteler, executive director of the Guadalupe-Blanco River Trust, GBRA's non-profit resource conservation arm, which helped arrange and is a partner to the agreement, said the North American Wetlands Conservation Act grant will provide funds for water for the Whitmire unit, for engineering and survey work, for canal-upgrade materials and for invasive species control.

Officials of the River Trust are also seeking additional corporate dollars to go along with the federal grant.