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Bandera County Landowner Group prepares for critical Monday TCEQ meeting on controversial wastewater permit

By Friends of Hondo Canyon
Contributed to the Prophet

The Friends of Hondo Canyon (FOHC) is making last minute preparations this weekend in advance of a critical meeting on Monday night in Bandera. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) is holding the meeting to hear landowner and citizen concerns about a proposed permit that would allow a for-profit youth camp to dump up to 49,000 gallons of treated wastewater into area creeks overlying the Edwards Aquifer.

The meeting is crucial because it is the last opportunity for input from residents. Following the meeting, only those who submitted comments will be able to request a Contested Case Hearing to examine all of the evidence and concerns.

To assist landowners in filing comments, two local workshops have been scheduled for this weekend in Tarpley. Volunteers will be available to help residents who have questions about the process, and provide residents who do not have Internet access the opportunity to submit their comments on-line.

The workshops will be Saturday and Sunday, Aug. 24 and 25, at the Old Tarpley Schoolhouse between 2 and 4 p.m.

Anyone who has questions or needs access to technology to file comments and to make a written request for Contesting Case Hearing on the permit should plan to come by to have questions answered.

The permit has been amended since it was first proposed in late July 2018. The permit now states that the applicant will apply for a 210 water reuse permit after the pollutant discharge permit is approved, with plans to reuse 75% of the wastewater in land application. The applicant has stated that his intention is to reuse 100% of the wastewater.

FOHC remains committed to protesting any wastewater discharge into the creek, during any circumstance. The fragile ecosystem of the creek cannot adequately process treated wastewater – even extra clean treated wastewater - as wastewater cannot be sufficiently cleaned to match the spring fed water in the creek.

FOHC has been asking residents and others who are upset about the proposed permit to file official comments with the TCEQ on their website in advance of the meeting on Monday night.

If granted, the permit would be precedent setting for the region. To date, no one has a direct pollutant discharge permit to discharge wastewater into the creeks, streams and rivers of the Upper Nueces River Basin. Only one pollutant discharge permit has been approved in Bandera County, and that is for the City of Bandera which dumps its wastewater into Medina River (of the San Antonio River Basin).

Youth camps are abundant in the Texas Hill Country – and of the 81 camps, only one camp has a permit for pollutant discharge. All other camps use one of two zero discharge methods: septic or Texas Land Application Permit, to dispose of their waste.

Wastewater is harmful to the environment because it contains much higher levels of nitrogen and phosphorus than are naturally present in the crystal clear streams of the Texas Hill country. These nutrients are the focus of concern because they produce algae blooms, which would make the creeks unsightly, unswimmable and uninhabitable.

“The facts are on our side, and our group has grown as more and more people in the area learn about what could happen if this permit is approved in its present form,” Margo Denke one of the founders of FOHC, said. “All of our energy over the weekend is dedicated to continuing to answer questions about the process, and encouraging people to turn out on Monday to make sure their voices are heard. Another critical thing people need to know is that they need to make an official request that the TCEQ conduct a Contested Case Hearing as part of their comments.”

FOHC is asking the TCEQ to reject the permit in its present form and to convince the camp owners to change to a Land Application Permit that

would not allow any discharges into the native waterways. Under this type of permit all wastewater would be used for irrigation and none would be released into the waterways.

The TCEQ Official Public Meeting where residents can register their opposition to the current permit is at 7 p.m. on Monday, Aug. 26, at the Mansfield Park Recreation Hall in Bandera.