



Wednesday, November 12, 2008

## Restoration hopeful for once hazardous Plum Creek

Jen Biundo

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With increased growth on the IH-35 corridor, pollution levels in Plum Creek are rising. (Photo by Jen Biundo)

Growing up in Kyle in the 1950s, the stretch of Plum Creek near the railroad tracks just west of Burleson Road provided the backdrop for many of Jane Word Kirkham's childhood memories.

"My sisters and I used to go on that low water crossing with a string and bacon and catch crawfish," Kirkham recalled.

But in recent years, fast paced growth along the IH-35 corridor has polluted the waters of Plum Creek, bringing contaminants such as E. Coli bacteria and harmful levels of nutrients such as phosphorous and nitrogen. In 2004, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TQEC) declared that Plum Creek was no longer recommended for human contact recreation such as swimming or wading.

Now an ambitious plan is underway that could restore the impaired creek back to health. In December of 2006, Plum Creek was selected as a pilot in the Texas Watershed Steward Program, developed by the Texas Cooperative Extension and the Texas State Soil and Conservation Board to protect and restore local waterways.

Largely funded by a \$1.4 million federal grant, the Watershed Protection Plan (WPP) lays out methods to carefully assess water quality in Plum Creek and offers tactics and measurable goals for reduction of pollution.

The extensive plan ranges from encouraging homeowners to clean up their pet waste, to educating farmers on safer agricultural practices, to helping cities better treat wastewater before releasing it into waterways such as Plum Creek, to managing wildlife such as feral hogs and waterfowl.

"It's a proactive, holistic approach to water quality management," said Susan Meckel, an environmental coordinator in water resource protection for the Lower Colorado River Authority.

Numerous stakeholders in the program include the cities and counties in the watershed, Texas Agri-Life Extension Service, the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority, the Plum Creek Conservation District, TCEQ and the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Plum Creek emerges from the ground in [Hays County](#) west of [Kyle](#), flowing 52 miles through Lockhart before converging with the San Marcos River south of Luling. To the east it's a small and intermittent waterway, but it gathers strength downstream, providing recreation and drinking water to residents of the Lockhart area.

In the Kyle area, bacteria enter the creek through municipal wastewater discharge, failing septic systems, pet waste left on lawns and parks, and run-off from impervious cover.

Further downstream, excess nutrients like phosphorous and nitrogen present a problem to aquatic life. Those nutrients can come from agriculture or livestock, or could also result from wastewater discharge upstream.

"Plum Creek, in the upper portions along the IH-35 corridor, is really under increased pressure from urban development," Meckel said.

The cities of Kyle and [Buda](#) are taking steps to cut back on pollution to Plum Creek. Kyle recently received a \$310,000 federal grant that will go to measures such as upgrading wastewater detention ponds, street sweeping, installing dog waste stations in parks, and public education.

Local residents can take their own steps to prevent polluting Plum Creek, MEckel said, by picking up pet waste, minimizing use of lawn fertilizer and pesticides, not dumping harmful chemicals down the drain and properly maintain septic systems.

"It takes a lot of education," Meckel said. "We need to let people know it's their creek and they can make a difference."

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