

Bacteria Implementation Group

The Bacteria Implementation Group (BIG) will prepare an implementation plan to remedy bacteria impairments in twelve watersheds in the Houston area. These watersheds encompass most of Harris County and portions of Montgomery, Galveston, Fort Bend, Brazoria, Walker, Waller, Liberty, Grimes, and San Jacinto Counties.

Background

In 1996, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality first identified waterways in the Houston region as having bacteria levels high enough to raise concerns about whether the identified waterways are safe for swimming and wading. These waterways were listed in the state's "303(d) List," which identifies waterways that do not meet state standards for various uses.

Since then, TCEQ has studied these and other waterways more thoroughly to discover the extent of the high levels of bacteria. As a result, additional waterways have been listed as impaired.

The state is developing Total Maximum Daily Loads, or TMDLs, for these waterways. TMDLs are like a budget for pollution: they quantify how much of a pollutant a waterway can absorb and still meet state standards and they identify how much of a reduction is required to meet the state standard.

The twelve watersheds with impaired waterways have been grouped into four TMDL projects: Buffalo and Whiteoak Bayous, Clear Creek, Lake Houston, and Houston Metro. As of June 2008, the Buffalo/Whiteoak and Clear Creek TMDL projects have been drafted and are in the public comment period. The Lake Houston and Metro Area TMDL projects, which started later, are probably one to two years from completion. After a TMDL is completed, an implementation plan, or I-Plan, must be developed to identify the means of reducing bacteria levels.

Because the people, resources, and solutions for the I-Plans for these TMDLs will have so many similarities, stakeholders from the TMDL projects agreed that a combined group to address the development of the I-Plan would be appropriate. Through a broad-based, consensus process facilitated by the Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) a committee to address implementation was formed.

The thirty-member committee known as the Bacteria Implementation Group, or the BIG, is responsible for receiving input, establishing working groups, facilitating communications, developing and adopting recommendations, and providing oversight. H-GAC will provide staff support.

Activities of the BIG are open to all interested parties, and people are encouraged to participate in the various work groups that will be formed to address specific water quality issues.