The principal aim of the Texas Clean Rivers Program is to ensure safe, clean water supplies for the future of Texas -- for drinking water needs, for industry, for irrigation, for recreation, for healthy ecosystems, and for all other uses of this most valuable state resource. According to the Mission Statement contained in the *Clean Rivers Program Long Term Action Plan, 2000-2005:*

> *The goal of the Clean Rivers Program is to maintain and improve the quality of water resources within each river basin in Texas through an ongoing partnership involving the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission, other agencies, river author-ities, regional entities, local governments, industry and citizens. The program will use a watershed management approach to identify and evaluate water quality issues, establish priorities for corrective action and work to implement those actions.*

The key strategy for meeting this goal is to re-orient everyone's thinking -- government officials, private interests, and citizens -- toward a "watershed approach" to water quality management. Numerous activities occur in watersheds that can generate pollutants -- everything from industrial and agricultural processes to everyday activities such as lawn care and auto maintenance. The idea behind a watershed approach is to consider *simultaneously* all these potentially harmful activities when studying water quality problems and designing solutions. This comprehensive approach is increasingly important as the United States moves beyond its 25-year campaign to bring "point sources" of water pollution under control (such as industrial and municipal wastewater discharges) and shifts its focus to even more challenging water quality problems, such as the "nonpoint source" pollution associated with storm runoff. Where various pollutants end up in the environment is tied to the movement of water across the land after rainfall and to subsurface flows of water through aquifers. So a regional, watershed-based approach also is critical since government responds to most problems within various jurisdictional lines while environmental problems occur within natural settings unrelated to political boundaries.

Objectives of the Clean Rivers Program

Identify high-priority water quality problem areas in order to focus resources and future studies on those areas.

Make a comprehensive assessment to ensure that a broad range of potential pollution threats to water resources is taken into account and the relative risk of each weighed.

Provide sufficient and reliable information to the TNRCC, other agencies, river authorities, local governments, and the public to enable them to make informed decisions and take appropriate corrective action to meet water quality goals.

Develop a cooperative partnership between river authorities, other regional entities, local governments, state agencies, private industry, conservation organizations, and other local interests to identify and address water quality problems within basins more effectively.

Avoid duplication of effort among these partners in various water quality protection initiatives.

Involve citizens and private organizations in efforts to protect local water resources through a "grass roots" approach to identifying local water quality concerns, setting priorities, and designing effective solutions.

Make better use of the extensive water quality information already assembled by various agencies and groups while also identifying gaps where information is lacking and more effort is needed.

Evaluate whether perceived water quality problems are legitimate concerns by applying scientific methods and using available data to reach meaningful conclusions about potential environmental and public health risks.

The Clean Rivers Program has effectively become a "testing ground" for full-fledged watershed management in Texas. This includes such initiatives as basin-wide water quality monitoring strategies and simultaneous expiration of wastewater permits within watersheds to allow for more coordinated permitting. Besides keeping Texas at the lead of a nationwide trend, this also puts the state in a favorable position as Congress works toward a revised Clean Water Act for the

remainder of the 1990s that emphasizes a watershed-based approach to water quality protection and enhancement. The Clean Rivers Program also adopts the theme of preventing pollution at its source whenever possible to avoid the high cost of treating wastes for release into the environment -- or, even worse, correcting the ecological damage which may result from these releases.

As the objectives indicate, the Clean Rivers Program establishes a consensus-building process in each of the state's major river and coastal basins. It is a "bottom-up" process for bringing local perspective and insights into water quality management while helping the state to meet its water quality responsibilities under the federal Clean Water Act, the Texas Water Code, and other legislative mandates. This allows for:

- priorities to be set locally by those who know the area best and naturally have the greatest concern for their own waters,
- regional differences to be taken into account, such as variations in water characteristics and types of pollutants, landscapes and other natural influences, and the degree of development and population growth, and for
- the state's residents and decisionmakers to appreciate how everyone ultimately shares responsibility for achieving and maintaining clean, safe waters.

The results of the Clean Rivers process must help to set the agenda for all other water quality management programs: monitoring, standards development, permitting, enforcement, public outreach, and field investigations and research. At the same time, these programs must take advantage of the basin assessment process to see that their information needs are addressed and in line with local priorities. In the end, the underlying goal of the entire Clean Rivers process is to make the most effective use possible of the valuable public funds already directed toward water quality protection.

The Bottom Line

The "bottom line" of the Clean Rivers Program is to help the state, the region, and its elected leaders and citizens answer more reliably such fundamental questions as:

- What is the quality of our water?
- Are state water quality standards being met?
- What are the sources and impacts of water pollution?
- Where is greater enforcement action or public education needed to reduce pollution?
- Where do we need more monitoring to improve our knowledge of water quality conditions?
- Are state management programs in line with local priorities?
- What can we expect in the future for our waterways?