

Texas Groundwater Protection Committee Celebrates 20 Years



The Texas Groundwater Protection Committee in session

The Texas Groundwater Protection Committee (TGPC) took time to celebrate its efforts to protect the state's groundwater sources and celebrated its 20th anniversary on October 26, 2009. Created by the Texas Legislature, the purpose of the interagency Committee is to improve coordination among the state's multiple water and waste regulatory programs.

Since 1989, the TGPC has implemented the state's policy of non-degradation of the state's groundwater resources by "identifying opportunities to improve existing groundwater quality programs and promote coordination among agencies," according to its latest biennial report, *Activities and Recommendations of the TGPC: Report to the 81st Legislature* (http://www.tceq.state.tx.us/assets/public/comm_exec/pubs/sfr/047_08.pdf).

Accomplishments

- The Committee's *State Management Plan for Prevention of Pesticide Contamination of Groundwater* is paramount among the TGPC's accomplishments during the last 20 years, says Cary Betz who represents Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) Executive Director Mark Vickery as Committee chair. The generic plan addresses potential and actual groundwater contamination from pesticides.

“This is the single most important achievement we’ve made. It was done entirely through the Agricultural Chemical Subcommittee,” said Betz. “It was a large effort that spanned about five years. There was lots of involvement between the TCEQ and the Texas Department of Agriculture. The Committee blessed it and the EPA bought into it.”

- Through its biennial report, the Committee recommends projects that strengthen groundwater quality protection efforts, enhance data collection, and generate particular research studies. Many of the projects listed coincide with exceptional line-item budget requests being made to the Legislature by member agencies serving on the Committee.

“About 50 percent of our recommendations to the legislature are taken up in some way,” says Betz, adding that it would take a crystal ball to anticipate the challenges that lie ahead for the Committee. “Every two years our challenges change when the legislature meets.” But what he does expect during the 82nd legislative session, which begins in 2011, is a renewed focus on groundwater issues, in part due to the state’s recent drought.

- The Committee prepares the *Texas Groundwater Protection Strategy* (http://www.tceq.state.tx.us/assets/public/comm_exec/pubs/as/188.pdf) – a comprehensive groundwater-protection strategy with guidelines for preventing contamination and conserving-groundwater through coordination with other the agencies – and the *Joint Groundwater Monitoring and Contamination Report* (http://www.tceq.state.tx.us/comm_exec/forms_pubs/pubs/sfr/056_08_index.html), about the quality of groundwater with a list of groundwater-contamination cases and their enforcement statuses.

Interagency Subcommittees

“Ninety-nine percent of the Committee’s work is done by Subcommittees,” says Betz. These standing Subcommittees draw upon the expertise of the member organizations to identify needs to be addressed and pinpoint data that should be collected to achieve the Committee’s mission.

For example, in 2004, the Groundwater Research Subcommittee helped identify and get funding for important research on groundwater contamination. Arsenic was turning up in the groundwater of various areas of the state. At the request of the TGPC, the TCEQ contracted with the Bureau of Economic Geology, University of Texas at Austin, to undertake this research.

The results were surprising. Conventional assumptions held that arsenic was coming from the use of cotton defoliant, but the research found that the chemical element was leaching into groundwater from underground deposits of volcanic ash.

“We will be able to tell water suppliers ‘don’t drill into this zone, or case off that zone,’” Betz says. Casing off a zone, in this instance, means installing a protective sleeve of pipe (casing) on a particular strata to prevent the arsenic-contaminated water from entering the well bore and commingling with the rest of the water in the well.

The Public Outreach and Education Subcommittee identifies educational outreach needs, and member agencies work together to focus their efforts. They include providing demonstrations on procedures to plug abandoned wells, as well as developing fact sheets about on-site wastewater

treatment systems for homeowners, and about arsenic, perchlorate, nitrate, and radionuclide contamination for private well owners.



The TGPC celebrated 20 years of working to protect the quality of Texas groundwater