

## Summary of East Texas Aquatic Work Group Meeting

June 16, 2020

View the 1.5-hour meeting online. The password is AquaticWorkGroup1

Learn more about this work group and the Comptroller's East Texas Initiative.

### **Presentations:**

Debra Bills of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service gave an [overview of conservation agreement options](#). She welcomes outreach from anyone wanting to talk about the options. Contact her at [debra\\_bills@fws.gov](mailto:debra_bills@fws.gov)

Erik Orsak of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service provided an update on the latest version of the East Texas Mussel SSA. To request a copy of the East Texas Mussel SSA, contact [erik\\_orsak@fws.gov](mailto:erik_orsak@fws.gov) FWS welcomes new information but cannot take comments on analytical methods.

### **Summer 2020 research plans**

Sabine River Authority is distributing posters across the Sabine Basin to raise awareness and gather data on sightings and public interactions with alligator snapping turtles. [Download a copy of the poster](#) or email Bill Kirby at the Sabine River Authority at: [bkirby@sratx.org](mailto:bkirby@sratx.org).

The river authority, will soon begin work with Bio-West and Texas State University on mussel surveys and genetics in the Sabine Basin. It is willing to share the scope of work and discuss any aspect of the research, and is looking forward to working with TPWD, FWS and any other partners.

IF YOU HAVE GENETIC SAMPLES OF LOUISIANA PIGTOES OR TEXAS HEELSPLITTERS and/or would like to be involved with the genomic part of this research, please reach out to Bill Kirby at: [bkirby@sratx.org](mailto:bkirby@sratx.org)

The Sabine River Authority is also working with Mandi Gordon at University of Houston-Clear Lake to expand the Comptroller-funded [Western chicken turtle surveys](#) and encourages other landowners and agencies to do so.

Mandi Gordon reported the eDNA tests for the turtle have been successful. For more information [email Mandi](#) .

North East Texas Municipal Water District will be distributing alligator snapping turtle posters in the Cyprus drainage. It is also looking for opportunities to help with alligator snapping turtle and Western chicken turtle research. It is considering funding some mussel surveys upstream of Lake of the Pines.

On Wednesday, fish surveys showed there are host fish in this river reach. The river authority is interested in working on a CCAA with FWS on mussels and turtles and would be interested in doing so collectively with other stakeholders.

The Lower Neches Valley Authority is funding for more mussel surveys and is reviewing the latest mussel SSA to see where the work can be most helpful. It will be dewatering and revisiting the canal that had mature Louisiana pigtoes last year. Is working with TPWD now to figure out how to assess for any sign of recruitment.

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department will continue mussel community and water quality sampling in the Sabine River upstream and downstream of the State Park Highway 14 bridge. This work will include long-term mark-recapture sites so please be aware if you are sampling in this area.

It is talking with Lower Neches Valley Authority about using sidescan sonar surveys to assess habitat utilization and population size of mussels in the Lower Neches River. The work may begin later this summer.

It is working on a contract with Texas A&M to assess the reproductive life history, host fish, and propagation potential of Texas heelsplitter and Texas fawnsfoot.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service expects a final report this fall from A&M looking at changes to flows in East Texas rivers over time and impacts to mussel survey results. Sharing of the report and data beyond FWS will be at the discretion of the researchers.

It is funding A&M and Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries to do more mussel surveys through 2023. Approximately 12 sites will be surveyed this year, primarily in LA. The San Jacinto basin in Texas and several areas in the Calcasieu River basin in Louisiana are on the short list of rivers to be surveyed, but survey decisions have not been finalized. Final survey plans may be shared after being finalized with the researchers. Distribution of data will be at the discretion of the researchers.

Matt Johnson is the new FWS freshwater mussel coordinator for Texas. He can be reached at [matthew\\_s\\_johnson@fws.gov](mailto:matthew_s_johnson@fws.gov). Contacting him early in the project will help ensure fieldwork is done in a way that maximizes its value and is available for the FWS species status assessment. You can see his presentation [here](#).

The Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts gave an overview of alligator snapping turtle research priorities and draft plan. Colin McDonald asked that everyone review [this document](#), which summarizes research priorities for the alligator snapping turtle in Texas and proposes a manner to address them. If you are interested in participating in this work please reach out to [colin.mcdonald@cpa.texas.gov](mailto:colin.mcdonald@cpa.texas.gov) and prepare to discuss the work in detail at the next aquatic work group meeting on Thursday July 9, at 10 a.m.

**Discussion items:**

Is there a need at this point for centralized coordination on mussel survey efforts? Conclusion: yes.

By July 9, will stakeholders be ready to discuss the alligator snapping turtle research plan and their participation in detail? Conclusion: yes

**Next Steps:**

The Comptroller's office will host a meeting on July 9 that will focus on the alligator snapping turtle. The [outlook invitation can be downloaded.](#)

The Comptroller's office is working on logistics for an aquatic work group meeting dedicated to mussel research coordination that will most likely happen in mid to late July.