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## **ICA TAKES ON TCEQ FOR RANCHERS**

ICA Executive Director Bill Hyman spoke in support of landowners and ranchers at a recent Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) public hearing in Waelder, Texas. The subject of the hearing was the draft report of a recent study by TCEQ involving the Peach Creek watershed in Gonzales, Caldwell, Lavaca and Bastrop Counties. TCEQ has designated Peach Creek as an impaired stream, not meeting the required standards for *contact recreation*. Hyman, along with several others representing state associations and the Texas Department of Agriculture, spoke against the conclusions reached by the recent study involving water sampling and laboratory testing of the stream.

The message delivered by Hyman and others was that the sampling methods used by TCEQ were invalid and failed to gather representative samples of the entire watershed area. A total of 138 bacteria samples were gathered from four locations, with all but 26 samples being taken from one area. The one site from which 112 samples were taken is an area known to contain a high percentage of cattle and wildlife. The study encompassing over 500,000 acres reflected a cattle population of over 65,000 head and a feral hog population of just 9,463. Hyman and other ranchers testifying suggested to the agency that feral hog numbers may in fact exceed cattle numbers in the area of concern. The speakers also reminded the agency that feral hogs tended to congregate in the creek and in areas in close proximity to the stream bed. In fact the bacterial source tracking data gathered in the study showed that the largest single contributor of bacterial isolates (29%) originated from non-avian wildlife.

The watershed has been placed under "contact public recreational" standards for water quality even though every speaker represented to TCEQ that there were no such areas for public access along the stream. In fact the area would not be classified as impaired if secondary recreational use standards were applied. "Maintaining healthy streams is a priority for ranchers and landowners, but to use the same standards of water quality for the Peach Creek area as one does for the public areas of Barton Springs or the Comal River is ridiculous" Hyman stated. "We ask that the TCEQ enlarge the sampling area and apply standards consistent with the use of the area."

The TCEQ Commissioners will now evaluate the study and all public comments before proceeding with any other procedures. If, in the event the TCEQ utilizes the study, steps to limit inflows of non-point sources could possibly mean grazing limitations in the area. ICA will continue to provide input to the Commission on the evaluation and attempt to direct TCEQ towards a much more logical resolution of the problem.