

Lease program helps anglers' access to rivers

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Photo: Shannon Tompkins

Texas anglers are benefiting from the state's River Access and Conservation Areas program that uses federal dollars to create public river access for fishing through lease agreements with private landowners.

The 30-mile-or-so stretch of the Brazos River downstream from Lake Whitney holds a wonderful bass fishery, with spectacular scenery and a world of wildlife in, over and along its course.

What it didn't have until recently was a way for most anglers to access and enjoy most of that exceptional resource without a major commitment in time and effort. Distances between public access/egress points, where float-fishing anglers could put in or take out the shallow-draft, non-motorized kayaks or canoes required to navigate that section of the Brazos, were too great for a simple day-long float-fishing trip. With more than 20 miles between public access points on one section, only those willing and able to invest a couple of days – and at least one night - on the river were able to experience what the Brazos offers.

But that has changed on the Brazos and several other Texas rivers as a result of a state program that leases riverside tracts from private landowners willing to allow the public to use their property as sites to access rivers for bank fishing, launch canoes and kayaks and, in a case or two, overnight camping. The result is more and better opportunities for Texas anglers to access some of the state's most extraordinary fisheries.

"It's addressing an important issue," Craig Bonds, director of inland fisheries for Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, said of the agency's River Access and Conservation Areas program. "Access - lack of access - always ranks at or near the top of the list of things anglers tell us limits their participation. The leased access program is a way of increasing access in a way that benefits anglers, private landowners and the resource."

Private landowners key

Gaining the cooperation of private landowners is key to increasing access to rivers in Texas, a state where more than 95 percent of the land is privately owned and trespassing is a serious matter. While Texas has over the past decade greatly increased and improved awareness of access to rivers through its Texas Paddling Trails program, that program - now up to 71 individual paddling trails - focuses on access/egress locations that are already public - parks, public boat ramps and other public lands. The real need is public access along stretches of waterways bounded for miles by private property.

"The idea is to bring private lands into the equation, and strategically locate leased access in areas that provide the best benefit for the public and the landowner," said Tim Birdsong, chief of habitat conservation for TPWD's inland fisheries division and coordinator of the river access program. "The goal is to promote and develop sustainable public access and use."

That goal meshes with the purpose of the major funding source for TPWD's River Access and Conservation Areas program. The majority of the money used to pay private landowners for the lease of their property - making it accessible to the public by fashioning parking areas and kayak/canoe launch sites, monitoring and maintaining the site and conducting habitat enhancement projects - comes from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program.

That program, created in the 2011 Farm Bill and renewed in the 2014 Farm Bill, makes federal money available to states to pay private landowners for leases to their land to provide public access for hunting and fishing and conduct habitat enhancement projects on those properties. Texas' portion over the last three years has totaled \$750,000.

Using those federal dollars and donations from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation, a private organization that raises private funds to support TPWD

programs, and other private partners, the agency has entered into more than a dozen lease agreements with landowners on six rivers - Brazos, Colorado, Llano, Guadalupe, San Marcos and Neches.

On the Brazos below Lake Whitney, the agency has three public-access agreements, with sites located along what was a 20-plus-mile stretch that had no public access. Now, that stretch has access points as close as 5 miles apart - a distance perfectly suited for a leisurely day-long float-fishing trip.

Guadalupe opens up

The program also has enhanced TPWD's previous program of leasing access along the Guadalupe River below Canyon Lake, where anglers target the state's only year-round freshwater trout fishery. There, the agency has four areas leased for public use during the winter/spring period when the Guadalupe is stocked with trout.

On the San Marcos River, the program has a leased access agreement with San Marcos River Retreat, located about halfway between two public access sites 10 miles apart.

The agency also has used the program to improve access to the Colorado River downstream from Austin, leasing three sites, including two on the previously access-poor reach between Bastrop and Smithville.

"The Colorado downstream from Longhorn Dam is becoming known for trophy largemouth and Guadalupe bass," Birdsong said. "We've added two leases between Bastrop and Smithville that will really improve access in that part of the river."

The program has a lease agreement with a landowner on the South Llano River upstream from the South Llano River State Park, giving anglers bank access, parking and a kayak-launching area on the spring-fed, fish-rich Hill

Country stream. This year, bank-fishing anglers wanting to access the spring white-bass run on the Llano River upstream from Lake LBJ have that opportunity through a leased access agreement with the owners of the Kingsland Slab RV Park. That public access lease runs through June 30, 2017.

The public-access lease agreement for another popular white-bass spawning-run fishing spot - Chandler River Park on the Neches River upstream from Lake Palestine - is for a bit longer than that. The agreement gives anglers access to what can be world-class white-bass fishing for the next 20 years. The lease and improvements at the site were funded by the East Texas Woods and Waters Club.

Information on TPWD's River Access and Conservation Areas, including maps and site-specific regulations and information, is available on the agency's website - tpwd.texas.gov/fishboat/fish/recreational/rivers/lease_access.

A sense of ownership

TPWD plans to continue working to add new sites to the leased access program and incorporating angling workshops, habitat enhancements and fisheries research on the areas.

The program has the obvious benefits of giving Texas anglers improved access to some of the state's premier river fisheries. But it also increases opportunities for anglers to build strong connections to those rivers and develop a sense of stewardship and responsibility for the protection and conservation of the fisheries and the riverine ecosystems that support them.

"We want anglers to see these places as their 'home waters,' " Birdsong said.

The River Access and Conservation Areas program gives them keys to previously off-limits rooms in that home.