Texas State Soil & Water Conservation District Directors express concern over current sand mining operations

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Texas soil and water conservation district directors representing 216 Texas SWCDs attending their 72nd Annual Meeting October 29-31 in Bastrop unanimously agreed through a resolution to seek legislation and the cooperative efforts of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) to effect legislation and regulations requiring companies that commercially mine sand to be required to complete the reclamation of their mining operations for the purpose of maintaining air and water quality.

According to the McCulloch SWCD, the shale oil and gas exploration boom has created intense demand for high-quality sand, from mines. The silica sand shot through the ancient sandstone formations underlying Mason and adjacent McCulloch counties are used in the hydraulic fracturing process, to open fissures in the shale which then allows for oil and gas to be removed. When enough sand has been removed, companies can abandon the sites leaving behind empty pits. These pits open up the Hickory Underground Water Aquifer to various hazards. Mountains of waste sand are left, affecting air quality on windy days, not to mention the resulting erosion. Also, because topsoil has been removed, it is difficult to restore vegetation.

Reuben Geistweidt, Chairman of the Mason County SWCD, whose district co-sponsored the resolution with McCulloch SWCD, agrees. “Mining and reclamation of these pits are not regulated under State law. If the sand or gravel operations will affect groundwater quality, have a surface-water discharge or create a point-source air discharge, the operation may be regulated by TCEQ”, said Geistweidt.

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“In essence, what Texas SWCDs want is for the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board (TSSWCB) and the Association of Texas Soil and Water Conservation Districts (ATSWCDs) to work with the Texas Legislature to put into statute regulations that will require the sand mining industry to complete the reclamation of the land”, added Geistweidt.

The Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board (TSSWCB) administers Texas’ soil and water conservation law and delivers coordinated natural resource conservation programs through the State’s 216 soil and water conservation districts.

Additionally, the TSSWCB is the lead agency for planning, implementing, and managing programs for preventing and abating agricultural and silvicultural nonpoint sources of water pollution. The agency also administers a water supply enhancement program through the targeted control of water-depleting...
brush. The TSSWCB also acts to ensure that the State’s network of 2,000 flood control dams are protecting lives and property by providing operation, maintenance, and structural repair grants to local government sponsors and facilitates the Texas Invasive Species Coordinating Committee.