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## High levels of contamination found in bayou

**By Christopher Smith Gonzalez**

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DICKINSON — Dickinson Bayou has higher levels of bacteria than the state allows, but a local group made up of residents and scientists are working on a plan to fix that.

On Wednesday night, Charris York, AgriLife Extension program coordinator for the Dickinson Bayou Watershed Partnership, discussed a plan to lower bacteria levels in the bayou water.

She said the implementation plan will be ready for public comment as soon as the end of September.

Water that falls in the about 100-square-mile Dickinson Bayou watershed drains into the bayou. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality has consistently found higher than acceptable levels of bacteria in the bayou.

York said the causes of bacteria contamination came from three main sources — septic tanks, wastewater treatment facilities and pets and livestock.

To deal with the problem, the group has come up with ideas ranging from educating homeowners on septic system care, to more frequent inspections of wastewater treatment plants and upgrades of city sewer lines.

Educating pet owners on the importance of picking up after their pets can be significant, she said.

"You would be amazed at the amount of bacteria that comes from dog feces," York said. "If people picked it up, it would make a huge difference."

York said members of the partnership's workgroups already were working with cities and other organizations to help implement some of the ideas.

The U.S. Clean Water Act requires that states have standards for pollutants in water. The bacteria E. coli and Enterococci work as indicators of contamination in freshwater and saltwater.

The state standard for E. coli in freshwater is 126 organisms of the bacteria per 100 milliliters. For saltwater, the standard is 35 organisms of E. coli per 100 milliliters.

"Dickinson Bayou is busting those standards," said Roger Miranda, geoscientist with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

Miranda is working on a study of the bacteria levels in the bayou and said the implementation plan York and the watershed partnership are developing will work with the report by the commission to bring those levels back down.

Along with the education programs, the implementation plan also could help the state's environmental agency ratchet up inspections of area water treatment facilities and require them to clean their treated water to a higher standard,

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Miranda said.

For Susie Blake, pretreatment coordinator and lab supervisor at a water treatment facility in League City, cleaning up the bayou is important because she said it's her "backyard."

She helped draw up the implementation plan and she said the goals of the plan were achievable.

"I think a lot of it will be based on education," Blake said. "You have to educate the public."

But not everyone at the meeting was as optimistic. Bridget Long, of Dickinson, said the implementation plan would be useless unless city officials were held accountable for the contaminants reaching the waterways.

"A lot of the things they are attempting to do are nothing more than putting a Band-Aid on the problem," Long said.

Long said she wanted to see cities do more to do things like fixing old, faulty sewer systems.

York agreed cleaning up the water in the bayou would not be easy. But she said the implementation plan was the first step in lowering bacteria levels.

"We are the people who live in the Dickinson Bayou watershed," York said. "We know the watershed better than anybody else does. So it's up to us to come up with the solutions."

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#### Stay Involved

- Once the Dickinson Bayou implementation plan is finished and ready for public comment, it will be posted on the group's website, [www.dickinsonbayou.org/index.htm](http://www.dickinsonbayou.org/index.htm).
- A meeting about neighboring Highland Bayou watershed will be held Tuesday at the Texas AgriLife Extension Service's Galveston County office, 4102-B Main St., in La Marque.

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