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Surface Water Quality Standards

In Texas, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) is responsible for developing and maintaining surface water quality standards for our rivers, lakes, streams, and coastal waters. We need the legislature to step in and make sure the standards are up to par.

Water Quality Standards Facts

- The Texas surface water quality standards (set by TCEQ) help to define if water is safe for recreation, aquatic life, or as a source for drinking.
- Nearly 40% of Texas water bodies do not meet water quality standards, with the majority impaired for bacteria.
- Every three years, TCEQ revises the surface water quality standards to ensure that they meet federal Clean Water Act requirements. The latest revision process was supposed to conclude in spring 2026, but has yet to be completed.
- Unfortunately, standards for salinity, produced water, and pre-production plastics are not included in the ongoing revision of the state's surface water quality standards.
- Salty brine discharge from seawater desalination can alter salinity levels in bays and estuaries, with detrimental effects on local communities and ecosystems that support fishing and tourism industries along the coast.
- Produced water is highly toxic wastewater generated by oil and gas operations. This waste contains organic and inorganic compounds, heavy metals, and even radioactive materials.
- Pre-production plastics (pellets, powders, and flakes) are the raw material used for making plastic products. These pollutants enter the environment through accidental spills during manufacturing, transportation, and handling.

Possible Solutions

- Prohibit the discharge of pre-production plastics, including pellets, powders, and flakes, and direct TCEQ to establish surface water quality standards to protect waterways from visible and invisible plastic pollution.
- Establish surface water quality standards for salinity that support aquatic life and protect the Texas coast from seawater desalination discharges, and only fund desalination projects that send their discharge at least 3 miles past the barrier islands as recommended by scientists.
- Prohibit the reuse of produced water - whether for land application, discharge in waterways, or any other uses - until research confirms that it can be treated to safe levels and protective discharge standards for produced waters are established by TCEQ.

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- Change state law to assure that trade secrets used by oil and gas companies to hide information about chemicals used in the hydrofracturing process must be shared with regulators to inform regulatory decision-making and scientists at the Texas Produced Water Consortium for research purposes.

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