SARA’s Vision
Leaders in Watershed Solutions

SARA’s Mission
Sustain and Enrich Life in the San Antonio River Watershed

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SARA’s Goals .................................................. 3
Employee Highlight ................................. 3
Westside Creeks History ....................... 4
Board Member Roberto Rodríguez

Restoration Pilot Program .......... 4
Westside Creeks Update .............. 5
Mission Reach Grand Opening .... 6
Special Mission Reach Insert
SARA’s Second Paddling Trail .... 11
Budget & Finance 2011/12 .......... 12
Updates in Goliad ....................... 14
Board Member H.B. Ruckman, III

Eagle Ford Shale Update ........ 14
South Texas Natives .............. 15
General Manager’s Message ........ 16

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By Steve Graham

The San Antonio River Authority’s (SARA’s) mission statement is to “Sustain and Enrich Life in the San Antonio River Watershed.” We do this by achieving results not only in our four-county jurisdiction, but also by creating positive change throughout the region, including the 14 counties that are part of the San Antonio River Basin. While we serve this regional market with our services, data and science, we hope our work as leaders in watershed solutions will have global impact. A tall order? I’ll say! We can only have that level of impact and success if we grow our strengths and those things that set our agency apart.

**So what sets SARA apart?**

- Innovative, sustainable, collaborative and customized watershed solutions. We believe that the many problems we face within our watersheds will require holistic and collaborative problem-solving processes that involve engagement by the public and private sectors. Many of the challenges we face aren’t unique, but they will require innovation, local expertise and knowledge to be effectively addressed and solved. We see the need to develop flood management and water quality projects, and regulations and applications that are sustainable and low impact from an economic, environmental and quality of life perspective.

- Expertise in improving systemic ecological health. We are developing watershed master plans in coordination with our partner cities and counties that look at total solutions. Not only do we want to identify the flood hazards and projects, but we want to find ways to incorporate water quality enhancements, low impact development and re-development, recreation, agricultural and commercial best practices, stream restoration, riparian zone protection and land use planning.

- Responsive, timely and passionate public service. SARA promotes a culture of timeliness and accuracy in the response to external requests for information and action. We embrace the role of public service and work to treat our constituents and our partners with dignity, respect and fairness.

We believe strongly in these ideals, and we believe they are key to making SARA a better organization, maximizing our effectiveness and setting us apart.

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**SARA’S GOALS - MEASURING UP**

**By Kim Garcia**

The River Reach newsletter provides information about many of the San Antonio River Authority’s projects and programs, but in this section we highlight our employees—the true heart of SARA.

It is with great pleasure that we introduce to you Rita Rodriguez, Geographic Information System (GIS) Technician with the San Antonio River Authority (SARA) Utilities Department.

Rita has been an employee with the Utilities Department for the past five years. She started as a temporary employee at SARA in 2005 before being hired as a full-time employee in July 2006. As a GIS Technician, Rita assists the Utilities Engineering Assistant in creating and maintaining the utilities sanitary sewer collection systems master plan. She does this through development and maintenance of a program of effective collection system mapping; data entry; meta-data research in collections, filing and documenting; and other general tasks related to geographic information systems. Rita also designs, develops and assembles a variety of maps for the Utilities Department, private developers and engineers to use in the design phase of construction to connect to sewer lines. John Gomez, Utilities Manager, says, “She is viewed by others as a go-to person and as a person who gets the job done. Her work with GIS helps SARA’s long-term goals by assuring our mapping plans are correct and archives will be in place for years to come.”

Rita has learned to be flexible with her work day to handle any situation that might arise. She says she “looks forward to a new challenge every day.” She strives to provide the best customer support internally and externally, in the office or out in the field.

Rita has lived in San Antonio all her life. She has a niece that is enrolled at the University of the Incarnate Word whom she supports and is very proud of. In her free time she loves to get together with family, barbeque and watch her SPURS! ★

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**EMPLOYEE HIGHLIGHT**

**By Kim Garcia**

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For much of San Antonio’s history, the Westside Creeks were a vibrant part of the Westside community; local residents relied on them as both a source of food and an opportunity for recreation. Many long-time residents, including myself, still recall fishing and swimming in these creeks, and recount stories of a diverse and fruitful ecosystem.

As noted on page 5, the Westside Creeks were channelized in the mid-1960s by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as part of the San Antonio Channel Improvements Project (SACIP), which began in 1954.

Although the channelization provides flood protection for the area, the project degraded the ecosystem and the creeks are no longer conducive to recreation. Over the years, changing views toward flood control techniques now encourage designs that promote healthy ecosystems and recreation.

As a member of both the San Antonio River Authority (SARA) Board of Directors and the Linear Creekways Advisory Board, it was pleasing to see the community support the recent passage of the City of San Antonio’s Proposition 2, which will bring walking trails that will enhance the quality of life and improve the recreational use of these creeks.

The Westside Creeks Restoration Project will go further by applying design improvements in the flood control channel; providing stable banks during flooding events; protecting water quality during normal flow; creating or retaining habitat for fish, water fowl and other wildlife in the area; and providing an operational plan for the long-term maintenance of the improved channel. Throughout the transformation, flood control will remain a major consideration.

The community recognizes that there is real history along these creeks, and they want to remember and bring back what we once had. I have been a strong advocate for the restoration of the Westside Creeks for many years, and I am excited to see what will happen in the future.
By Rudy Farias

As stated in previous River Reach newsletters, four creeks within San Antonio’s west side (Alazan, Apache, Martinez, and San Pedro Creeks) underwent channelization by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) in the 1960s to address major flooding. As a result, natural creekways were widened, deepened and, in some instances, lined with concrete. Native vegetation was removed to allow for the efficient passage of flood waters. Since the channelization, these creeks have been widely regarded as drainage ditches, instead of the creeks they once were.

The San Antonio River Authority (SARA), together with the community and partners, has been working on a community-based planning project for the past three years. With guidance from the Westside Creeks Restoration Oversight Committee (WCROC), three public workshops, a week long stakeholders’ workshop and numerous public meetings, a consultant team gathered the community’s input and created a conceptual plan for restoring the Westside Creeks. The plan was approved by the SARA Board of Directors at its June 2011 Board meeting. The adopted plan contains concepts for restoring the environmental condition of the creeks; maintaining or enhancing the current flood control components; and providing increased opportunities for people to enjoy the creeks.

The initial Phase 1A recommendation is to restore three reaches located within the Alazan, Apache and Martinez Creeks, and to continue working with planners and architects as they develop designs for the future Federal Courthouse on San Pedro Creek. Together, these four projects, and 14 miles of trails along four creeks, total a community investment of roughly $60 million.

SARA will work with the USACE as they draft a feasibility study to determine the level of federal interest in the project (see article on previous page). The WCROC will continue to seek community support for the project and position the projects for bond consideration in the upcoming 2012 City of San Antonio bond election.

To learn more about the Westside Creeks project, please visit www.westside creeks.com.
MISSION REACH GRAND OPENING

By Laura Waldrum

On June 25, 2011, after decades of planning and three years of construction, the San Antonio River Authority (SARA), Bexar County and other partner organizations of the San Antonio River Improvements Project celebrated the ceremonial opening of the first two miles of the Mission Reach Ecosystem Restoration and Recreation Project. The Mission Reach project is restoring the ecosystem of eight miles of the San Antonio River after it was channelized for flood control purposes in the 1960s. When the project is complete, approximately 113 acres of aquatic habitat and over 334 acres of riparian woodland habitat will be restored, providing both a sound ecosystem for wildlife and an area rich with recreational opportunities for the public.

Grand opening day began with a ceremony featuring speeches from local dignitaries including the Chairman of SARA’s Board of Directors, Gaylon Oehlke. United States Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar (above) made a special appearance and announced that the San Antonio River and the four historic missions situated along its banks have been nominated as a United Nations World Heritage Site, a prestigious designation that has not yet been bestowed on any location in the state of Texas. If the nomination is approved, the river and missions will share this title with famed historic sites such as the Statue of Liberty, the Great Barrier Reef in Australia and the Great Wall of China.

After the ceremony, festivities continued throughout the day with musical performances throughout the two mile stretch of river, pedicab rides for the public and a kids’ fishing clinic. SARA volunteers also lined the river to provide information for the public about the project and the ecosystem restoration process. In the new Mission Concepción Portal, an area designed to draw visitors from the river to the missions and vice versa, members of the San Antonio Living History Association dressed in historical garb and educated attendees about the history of the missions and life along the river.

It is estimated that between 3,000 and 4,000 people attended the grand opening celebration. However, more work is still planned on the Mission Reach project. Crews are working to complete the remaining six miles between Mission Road and Mission Espada. The entire project will be completed in 2013. ★
Get ready, paddling enthusiasts! The San Antonio River Authority (SARA) will soon announce the opening of the Saspamco Paddling Trail on the San Antonio River. This will be the second paddling trail operated and maintained by SARA. Stretching twelve miles along the San Antonio River through southern Bexar and northern Wilson Counties, the Saspamco Paddling Trail will offer a paddling adventure that is unmatched in the San Antonio area.

The trail begins at SARA’s river access site on Loop 1604 in Bexar County and ends at SARA’s Helton San Antonio River Nature Park near Calaveras, Texas. Although the Helton San Antonio River Nature Park is not scheduled to be fully operational for several years, the river access site will be the first area to open and allow visitors a glimpse of future nature park offerings.

You may be wondering, “What is the origin of the name Saspamco?” Saspamco is a small community in southern Bexar County whose name is an acronym for the San Antonio Sewer Pipe Manufacturing Company, a company that was the predominant employer in the community until the 1960s. The company has since closed, but the name remains.

SARA opened the Goliad Paddling Trail and two of its three river access sites in Goliad County in 2006, and is excited to offer another quality river recreation opportunity. The Saspamco Paddling Trail is scheduled to open on weekends in Fall 2011. Stay tuned to www.sara-tx.org for information regarding the opening of the paddling trail.

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You may be pet wise, but are you watershed wise when you walk your pet?

Pet waste is not only unpleasant to look at but it also contains bacteria and nutrients that can pollute our streams and rivers. When it rains, pet waste can be carried by runoff to our storm drains, which flow directly into our rivers, creeks and streams.

So here’s tip #3 for being watershed wise with your pet.

Make sure you pick up after your pet in your yard, when out on walks and even while using trails and parks. That way your pet poop won’t pollute. Pretty wise, eh? To find out which watershed you live in and for more tips and watershed wisdom, please visit the San Antonio River Authority’s website at www.sara-tx.org or call (210) 227-1373.

Wise Actions. Clean River.
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The Mission Reach Ecosystem Restoration and Recreation Project is transforming an eight mile stretch of the San Antonio River into a quality riparian woodland ecosystem. This unique project restores riverine features and riparian woodlands, reintroduces native plants, enhances aquatic habitat, and reconnects cultural and historical features.

The entire Mission Reach project will be completed in 2013.

PHASE 1 FACTS

Length: 1.25 miles (Lonestar Boulevard to the confluence of San Antonio River with San Pedro Creek)
 Ground Breaking on June 3, 2008
 Total Contract: $35.2 million
 Contractor: Laughlin-Thysse Design Team: Jacobs Engineering (Base Project and Betterments)
 Rialto Studio (Enhancements)
 Ford, Powell & Carson (Sign Design and Installation)
• 360,000 cubic yards of soil relocation
• Construction of a pilot channel, eight boulder weir guard control structures, two riffle structures and two embayment habitats
• Restoration of approximately 34 acres of native riparian vegetation
• Over 60 species of native grasses and wildflowers
• Approximately 3,000 trees to be planted in November 2011
• Construction of a pedestrian trail along the entire 1.25 miles
• Construction of two in-stream pedestrian footbridges
• Installation of picnic tables, benches, trash receptacles, drinking fountains and trail signage

Bexar County Visitor Tax Betterments:
• Additional pedestrian bridges, weirs and riffles
• Additional trail and street connection at Lone Star Boulevard
• Upgraded trail surface
• Under-bridge improvements for future art features
• Additional aquatic plants
• Art enhancements

PHASE 2 FACTS

Length: 1 mile (Confluence of San Antonio River with San Pedro Creek to Mission Road)
 Ground Breaking on February 13, 2010
 Total Contract: $32.7 million
 Contractor: Zachry Construction Corp. Design Team: Jacobs Engineering (Base Project and Betterments)
 Rialto Studio (Enhancements)
 Ford, Powell & Carson (Sign Design and Installation)
• 800,000 cubic yards of soil relocation
• Construction of a pilot channel
• Construction of six riffle structures and two embayment habitats
• Restoration of approximately 40 acres of native riparian vegetation
• Seeding of over 60 native grasses and wildflower species that are currently being established
• Over 2,500 native trees to be planted in 2012
• Construction of pedestrian trail along the entire phase
• Construction of one in-stream pedestrian footbridge
• Installation of picnic tables, benches, trash receptacles, drinking fountains and trail signage

Bexar County Visitor Tax Betterments:
• Street connections at Theo Avenue and Mission Road
• Additional trail on west bank from Theo Avenue to Mission Road (to be completed)
• Additional pedestrian “fly over” bridge at Concepción Creek (to be completed)
• Upgraded shade structure
• Upgraded trail surface
• Portal at Mission Concepción
• Theo Ave. realignment

The Mission Reach project is funded by Bexar County ($176.6 million), the City of San Antonio ($6.5 million); USACE ($51.9 million) and through private donations collected by the San Antonio River Foundation ($4.7 million). Funding for utility relocations by the San Antonio Water System (SAWS) totals $6 million.

The San Antonio River Authority is managing construction on the project.
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The board reviewed the budget carefully to balance the value of the technical projects and programs to address flood control and environmental protection with our increasing role in the maintenance of the River Improvements Project...
For the fiscal year 2011/12 several highlighted projects include:

- Project Manager of the San Antonio River Improvements Project
- Operations & Maintenance of the Museum Reach and the Mission Reach Phases 1 & 2
- Westside Creeks Restoration Project, including conceptual design phase and adaptive monitoring
- Stream Restoration Team & Natural Channel Design Concepts
- Water quality modeling and monitoring and targeted assessments of environmental threats within the basin
- San Antonio River Nature Parks in Wilson County, Goliad County and River Access Site openings
- Comprehensive Watershed Master Plans
- Development of Flood Warning systems
- Technical review and updates of FEMA flood plain maps
- Strategies to address environmental flow requirements for rivers and bays
- Sustainability and Low Impact Development projects

The fiscal year 2011/12 budget is available for review at www.sara-tx.org.
The Eagle Ford Shale oil and gas boom is bringing many economic benefits to Karnes County. As with any other type of human activity, it's important to ensure that natural resources are protected and preserved throughout the lifecycle of hydraulic fracturing, or “fracking.” The San Antonio River Authority (SARA) supports activities that bring economic development within our four-county jurisdiction. At the same time, SARA is staying engaged in the oil and gas play within our basin to ensure adequate protection of our basin’s natural resources.

One way SARA is engaging in the fracking process is through leasing of surface water rights to exploration and production companies. By putting SARA’s water rights up for temporary use, SARA is able to become involved and gain influence in the way fracking activities and associated business are conducted in the basin.

This involvement with oil and gas companies is already promising to pay off for the basin; companies to which SARA has leased water rights have agreed to donate any other surface water rights they’ve acquired back to SARA once they are no longer needed. This means that those additional surface water rights will be available to support the instream and environmental flows needed throughout the basin and bay system.

Another way SARA is ensuring responsible management of resources is through coordination of state, regional and local agencies to ensure effective communication and effective regulation of fracking. SARA hosted an inter-agency workshop earlier this year to help facilitate communication and cooperation among regulatory agencies (see article below).

The Eagle Ford Shale oil and gas play will bring significant economic development to Karnes County. SARA supports the responsible development of oil and gas resources, and is working to ensure that the basin, its communities and natural resources are protected and enriched throughout the process.

### COMMUNICATION: The Key to Protecting the Environment and Growing the Economy

By Laura Waldrum and Brian Mast

During the past year, the Eagle Ford Shale oil and gas play has changed the economic landscape of South Texas and has brought with it many questions regarding the possible environmental impacts of hydraulic fracturing (fracking) in the area. On May 20, representatives from the San Antonio River Authority (SARA), Texas Railroad Commission (RRC), Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) and other local and regional governmental entities involved in regulating and monitoring Eagle Ford Shale oil and gas exploration gathered at SARA’s administrative offices to familiarize the agencies with each other’s roles and jurisdictional responsibilities. The Eagle Ford Shale Agency Workshop was organized by SARA to foster inter-agency communication so each entity can better serve its constituents and direct questions and concerns to the proper authority should they arise.

“SARA is dedicated to maintaining strong lines of communication with state agencies, local community leaders and industry representatives to promote environmental protections for the river’s water quality and habitat, while welcoming the economic opportunities for our basin brought about by the Eagle Ford Shale play,” Suzanne Scott, SARA’s General Manager, said when describing the impetus for organizing the workshop.

The 82nd Texas Legislature, recognizing the importance of open communication, passed House Bill (HB) 3328 this session. This bill requires exploration companies to disclose the composition of fracking fluids by publishing the names of chemicals and the volume of water used in the fracking process for each well. SARA believes HB 3328 will provide the state and public a better understanding of the amounts and types of natural and man-made resources utilized in the process.

The Eagle Ford Shale oil and gas play offers tremendous economic opportunities that can be realized while protecting our vital natural resources. One key to optimizing the benefits of this opportunity is to ensure all interested parties remain well-informed and engaged by maintaining open lines of communication. SARA aims to encourage all parties involved to reach out to the public at every opportunity.
The diamondback watersnake is a common, non-venomous inhabitant of riparian areas along the San Antonio River and its tributaries, from Bexar County to Goliad County. This species is active during the day, except during the warmest summer months. It is often observed swimming just under the surface of the water with its head exposed or warming itself at the water’s edge on sun-exposed brush or logs. The diamondback watersnake hunts for fish and frogs that are found in its natural habitat.

Unfamiliar observers of this species often confuse it with other venomous snakes, such as the water moccasin, because of its color pattern and aquatic habitat. But unlike the water moccasin, the diamondback watersnake lacks venom and heat-sensing facial pits, and it has round pupils rather than the elliptical pupils that water moccasins possess.

The diamondback watersnake can also be identified by noting a combination of color pattern and scale characteristics. The background color of the back is a variable shade of brown, overlain by a darker net-like pattern forming the diamond shapes that give this snake its name. This snake generally has a yellow belly with dark, crescent-shaped spots on the margins. Also characteristic of this species is an additional row of scales that separates the scales around the eyes from the lip scales. The scales are ridged or “keeled.”

While its bite is not venomous, please do not try to pick up the diamondback watersnake; it can be very aggressive and bite readily if handled. Diamondback watersnakes are an important component of the ecosystem of the San Antonio River, but they should be appreciated from a safe distance.
By Suzanne Scott, General Manager

The 82nd Texas Legislature faced tall obstacles this session. The Legislature was tasked with creating a balanced budget for the next biennium while facing a $27 billion funding shortfall. It also had to redraw the political district maps, always a sensitive issue, and focus on sunset review of key agencies. This led to 1,451 fewer bills filed compared to the 81st legislative session last year.

Two bills on which the San Antonio River Authority (SARA) focused this session were the Texas Water Development Board (TWDB) and Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) Sunset Bills extending each agency through 2023. Staff worked with legislators on an exemption of small private dams in rural areas from TCEQ’s dam safety regulatory authority. SARA is committed to maintaining its 40 dams in the river basin to ensure they continue to meet state and federal safety standards.

SARA staff also monitored legislation relating to illegal dumping, the Clean Rivers Program and other governance issues. Staff provided testimony to help legislators pass a “Don’t Mess with Texas Water” program to prevent illegal dumping in Texas waterways, as well as worked to sustain important water quality monitoring activity and data collection in the Clean Rivers Program to target threats to water quality in our rivers and creeks. Although the Clean Rivers Program did receive a funding cut of $500,000, TCEQ is seeking to absorb the cuts through administrative costs so that the monitoring program can continue at its present level.

SARA will continue to work with legislators as they reexamine dam safety issues and seek to identify a funding source for the implementation of the State Water Plan. We would like to thank our delegation for their commitment, responsiveness, cooperation and leadership on important water and environmental issues during this difficult session and special session. The decisions facing this state are tough, no doubt, but we are fortunate to have a delegation that strives to protect our natural resources.