



NEWS RELEASE

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Ground Water Survey to Jumpstart Awareness Effort in BR

Baton Rouge – The Louisiana Office of Conservation is putting the information gained from a recently completed survey of Baton Rouge-area residents to work as part of a multi-faceted effort to raise awareness about local groundwater resources.

The survey, conducted in support of the Office of Conservation’s “Water-Wise in BR” public education campaign, provides a baseline of information on local attitudes, opinions, and knowledge about groundwater issues, and will be an important asset as the Office moves forward in crafting its approach to public engagement on the subject.

“A little over half of the people surveyed were able to correctly identify the Southern Hills aquifer as the source of our drinking water,” Commissioner of Conservation Jim Welsh said. “The other half of the people didn’t know, or thought the Mississippi River or a reservoir system was the source of our supply. Whether you view this as a glass half-full or half-empty situation, the survey gives us a solid foundation of data that we didn’t have before. It will be an invaluable tool as we continue to expand our public education activities in the Baton Rouge area.”

The Southern Hills aquifer is a vast and plentiful groundwater system stretching over most of southwest Mississippi and southeast Louisiana. The aquifer supplies the Baton Rouge area with both drinking water and water used in industrial processes such as energy generation and manufacturing. In response to a public call to intervene and assist the Capital Area Ground Water Conservation Commission (CAGWCC) in dealing with concerns about saltwater encroachment into the aquifer from across the Baton Rouge fault, a geological formation roughly following the I-10 corridor through downtown, the Office of Conservation has been working closely with the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), CAGWCC and high-volume users in evaluating the current condition of the aquifer and determining future action to provide for its sustainability.

As part of an aggressive public outreach and awareness effort mandated in Welsh's May 2012 official order (ENV 2012-GW011), the current "Water-Wise in BR" campaign has been developed by the Office of Conservation with the support of the Groundwater Awareness Campaign Fund, a charitable fund managed by the Baton Rouge Area Foundation. The Fund is "dedicated to promoting awareness on the importance, value and benefits of groundwater and its use, development, management and protection in our region through disseminating relevant information and knowledge." Welsh called the initiative "a blueprint for our groundwater education efforts across the state, creating a program in which corporate citizens and others interested in sustaining our groundwater can pool resources and assist the state in broader outreach." Regarding the pilot project here in Baton Rouge, Welsh said that "our first major goal was to get some reliable statistics. With this survey, we have done just that. We now have important data on perceptions of water quality, consumption, and regulation."

He said one of the most important findings was a need for greater public awareness about threats to the sustainability of the Southern Hills aquifer system itself. More than 75 percent of the survey respondents were not aware of any threats at all. Only 17 percent identified saltwater encroachment as a "potential" threat, and only 15 percent viewed overuse of the resource as another "potential" danger to sustainability.

"Taken as a whole, the survey results give us a green-light to move ahead vigorously with our public education efforts," Welsh said. The survey and results can be viewed under the "News Releases & Announcements" section at: www.dnr.louisiana.gov/groundwater

Key initial features of the education and awareness campaign include a website, a workshop for middle school and high school science teachers, and a set of traveling exhibits that will be available to public and school libraries on a rotating basis. The teacher workshop is scheduled for Friday, Feb. 1, 2013, at the Capitol Park Museum in downtown Baton Rouge.

Office of Conservation education and public outreach officer Matthew Reonas, who is handling much of the "Water-Wise in BR" effort, noted that "the workshop is a great opportunity to engage teachers with primary source materials and relevant, professionally-produced lesson plans and activities that can be implemented in the classroom immediately. It meets continuing education needs and there is no fee or charge for attendance. We believe that parish education leaders, our superintendents and principals, realize the public need for more awareness on this topic, and will work with teachers of earth, physical, and environmental science to get them to the workshop."

For further information on the "Water-Wise in BR" campaign, or to register for the teacher workshop contact:

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