

Environmentalists angry at TXU Electric - Groups - Dallas Morning News, The (TX) - April 23, 2000 - page 28A

April 23, 2000 | Dallas Morning News, The (TX) | Drake Witham | Page 28A

A 100-foot-wide swath of fallen trees through one of the city's most treasured wildlife areas turned Earth Day into a nightmare for some area environmentalists Saturday.

Members of the Environmental Center of Dallas and the county's Audubon Society spent Friday and Saturday surveying the fallen trees near the Old Fish Hatchery, just south of White Rock Lake.

The trees - 100 to 150 hackberry, live oak and Chinese tallow on 2 1/2 acres - were cut by crews working for TXU Electric to make room for power lines. TXU spokesman Chris Schein said that the utility company "made a mistake in the final execution and we take responsibility for it."

The cutting has angered the environmental groups that had been negotiating with TXU to protect the area.

"There were piles of dead trees everywhere, stumps and cut trees all over the place," said **Kelly Cotten**, president of the Environmental Center of Dallas. "It's massive destruction. It will take 10 to 15 years before we see any regeneration at all."

Mr. Schein said TXU had been working with the environmental groups since last fall "to try to come up with a way where we could accomplish what we needed in terms of our transmission lines' build-up, with a minimum amount of impact on the environment."

He said that the trees had to be cleared to make room for replacement power line poles and that the company erred in not communicating to the environmental groups that work in the area was not completed.

The cutting comes just two weeks after TXU officials accepted an award from the Audubon Society for the company's work to protect the hatchery area.

Located on the southern tip of White Rock Lake, the Old Fish Hatchery was established in the 1930s and is home to more than 200 bird species, foxes, beavers and mink, Mr. Cotten said. He estimated that more than 15,000 bird-watchers visit the hatchery each year, particularly lands along the power lines flanked by beaver ponds and densely foliated lands.

"It's like being plopped down in the middle of East Texas," Mr. Cotten said. "The number of bird species rivals any state park in the country, and it's right in the middle of Dallas."

He said that TXU took great care last fall while replacing its power lines, which run through the center of the property. The company approached the environmental groups before work began.

Mr. Schein said the company took the unusual step of laying down mats to distribute the weight of heavy trucks that had to drive along the path, which is flanked by beaver dams and heavy foliage.

The company's work was so impressive that the Dallas County Audubon Society issued a letter of commendation to TXU earlier this month for being so environmentally conscientious, said Reba Collins, president of the society.

"This had been a real cooperative effort, and now it's a complete shock," she said. "They cleared absolutely everything out. They cut down everything. It's a clear-cut."

Mr. Schein said that the company should have made it clear that more cutting had to be done and should have brought the environmentalists in to work out a final plan.

He said the company could have relayed those wishes to the contractor, but many of the cuts would have been unavoidable.

"To call it a clear-cut is slightly hyperbolic," Mr. Schein said. "There was cutting and trimming we had to do, and we should have brought them in on the final stage."

He said he does not believe the company is in violation of the city's tree-protection ordinance, which carries a \$2,000 per tree fine, because the company is obligated to keep the power lines clear as part of its easement contract with the city.

He said the power company plans to meet with the environmentalists on Monday to seek out a resolution.

Tom Cook, an environmental center board member, said he wanted to talk to TXU representatives about what could be done about the lifeless trees left behind and how to ensure that something like this would never happen again. He also wants TXU representatives to make amends, he said.

"In some way, they need to make a significant gesture for the environment," he said, "particularly in light of the good will that the environmental community had expressed toward them."