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Earth Day Texas has sharper edges this year

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This weekend's Earth Day Texas festival, like its predecessors, includes lots of things for kids to do and adults to learn. And lots of corporations will be promoting their own environmental performance.

But there are also new twists on the free-admission activities at Fair Park, which start Friday. They include an enhanced look at earth science, including climate change and oceans, with presentations by federal research agencies and others.

Also fresh on the agenda are presentations on sustainable food and on Dallas' new urbanism, the effort to make the central city a better habitat for people.

Perhaps the most striking change is a greater emphasis on the nearly nonstop tension between Texas' policies and environmental protection — and on helping people decide how to vote.

“We have the lofty ambition of changing the political climate of Texas,” said Dallas developer Trammell S. Crow, the festival's chief sponsor and all-around godfather.

Earth Day Texas runs from Friday through Sunday. Organizers call it the world's largest Earth Day initiative and are projecting attendance at 75,000.

A number of events put a somewhat sharper edge on a festival best known for promoting feel-good environmental awareness for businesses and people.

Denton's ban on fracking for natural-gas drilling, and industry-backed legislative efforts to rescind such local controls, will be subjects of a live debate between a top Republican elected state official and a fracking opponent.

Meanwhile, former Houston Mayor Bill White, who became known as an environmental crusader — but also became one of many Democrats who lost elections to former GOP Gov. Rick Perry — will talk about Texas'

environmental approach. With him onstage will be the head of one of the state's most powerful lobbies, the heavily Republican-leaning Texas Association of Business.

One speaker doing a solo gig is Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, a Republican tea-party favorite who, at a 2014 campaign appearance, said he would leave worrying about climate change "in the hands of God. He's handled our climate pretty well for a long time."

But another speaker is Texas Christian University environmental scientist Michael Slattery, whose talk is entitled "The Climate Denial Train: Why Is It So Strong?"

More on the science and impacts of climate change will come from Texas A&M agricultural economist and climate researcher Bruce McCarl, recipient of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize.

And Karena Gore, director of the Center for Earth Ethics at Union Theological Seminary and oldest daughter of former Vice President Al Gore, will speak about moral aspects of climate change.

Crow said Earth Day Texas has maintained its focus on encouraging business to become more environmentally responsible and recognizing those with achievements to share.

But he said the festival, now in its fifth year, will also be paying increased attention to whether policies, especially in Texas, are helping or hurting the environment.

Some of the speaker invitees, including Patrick and Texas Railroad Commissioner Ryan Sitton, have raised some complaints from environmental advocates. The commission regulates oil and gas and has defended hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, from public criticism.

Sitton will debate Adam Briggles, a leader of the successful campaign for a referendum banning fracking in Denton. The Denton ban faces challenges in court and in the Legislature.

North Texas blogger Sharon Wilson, organizer for the nonprofit group Earthworks' Oil and Gas Accountability Project, said Texas officials don't need Earth Day Texas' help to spread their views.

"It is positively Orwellian to give climate deniers a platform on the very day that is dedicated to protecting the Earth," Wilson said. "These politicians are controlling the debate in Texas. They have a platform everyday and should not be given one on Earth Day."

Crow, however, said inviting politicians to speak at Earth Day Texas will expose them, perhaps for the first time, to environmental science and education. "We want to rub off on them."

Crow, 63, is a longtime supporter of Log Cabin Republicans, an organization of gay GOP members, and of Conserv- America, formerly called Republicans for Environmental Protection. Each group has a tough time being heard in the party, but Crow said he'll keep on.

"Conservation," he said, repeating a well-known motto, "is conservative."

If you go

What: A festival of education and activities about the environment

When: Friday-Sunday

Where: Fair Park

How much: Admission to everything is free

For schedules and guides: www.earthdaytx.org

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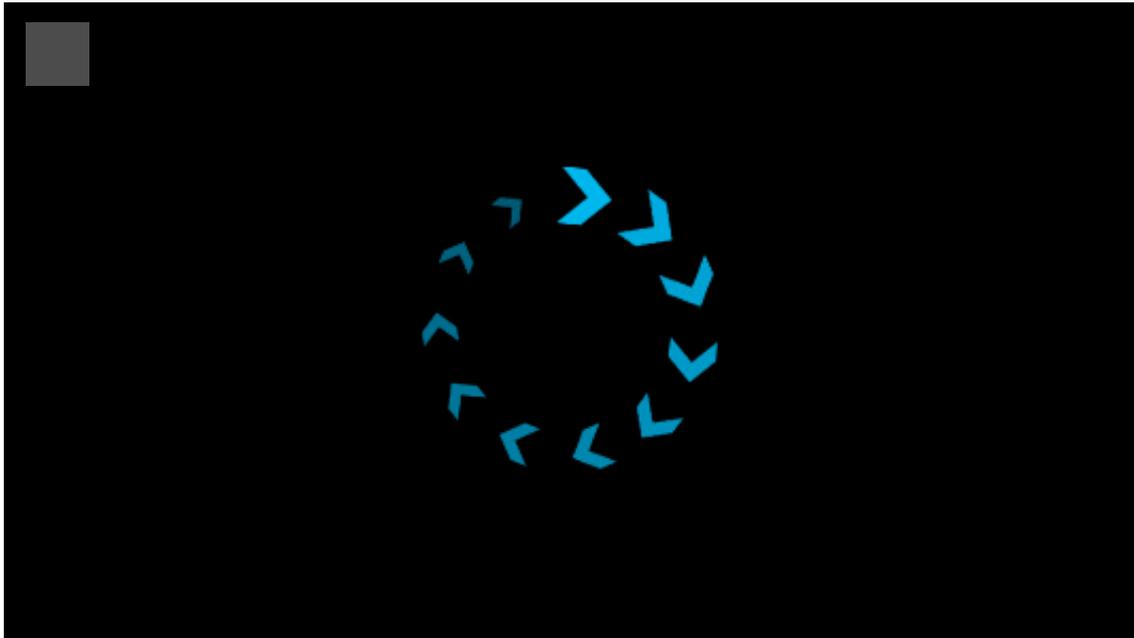
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