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Contact:
Christy Muse, Executive Director
Hill Country Alliance
christy@hillcountryalliance.org
512.560.3135

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Do more soon to preserve our waters

Milan Michalec

It's official. According to the National Climatic Data Center, the year 2011 was the driest on record. The average total rainfall across the state was 14.88 inches, beating the previous record low of 14.99 inches established in 1917.

As these records were being set, the ability of the public water systems throughout Texas to meet demand clearly showed the impact of drought. By November 2011, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality had recorded that 956 out of 4,721 water-supply systems had imposed some form of restricted water use.

Clearly, climate variability can affect water availability and drought contingency plans are implemented to restrict water use during dry times. However, the long-term planning to meet Texas's future water demand is contained in the State Water Plan, a 50-year look into the future. The Texas 2012 Water Plan reflects a grim reality.

In the cover letter of the plan, Edward G. Vaughan, chairman of the Texas Water Development Board, states, "The primary message of the 2012 State Water Plan is a simple one: In serious drought conditions, Texas does not and will not have enough water to meet the needs of its people, its businesses, and its agricultural enterprises."

The 2012 plan identifies a $53 billion bill to implement more than 500 "potentially feasible" water management strategies recommended by the 16 regional water planning groups. However, this is only about one-fourth of the $231 billion total cost for other water related requirements, such as water supplies, treatment and distribution, as well as wastewater and treatment and the flood control for the next 50 years.

The purpose of this plan is to make sure everyone has an adequate water supply in times of drought, but it is ultimately a political process that pays for the necessary projects. Yet budgets are tight and drought will take an even greater toll should it persist as anticipated.

Now, more than ever, is the time for each of us to take an active role in water conservation in order to extend our existing water supplies. Without waiting for plans and finances or rains to catch up, there are ways to increase your water supply today.

A good first step is to learn who supplies your water, where it comes from and how it is managed should it become short in supply. Request a copy of the drought contingency plan from your water supplier or your groundwater conservation district.

Next, take action. Aggressively conserve water inside your home, but look outdoors for the biggest savings. Set an example for your neighbors by selecting native turf varieties to replace the high water users such as St. Augustine. Other water savers include native plants and mulches.

Supplement your existing water supply. With an adequate roof print and storage capacity, rainwater harvesting is a proven, reliable source for whole house, potable use — even in times of limited rainfall. Learn the basics by catching the rain for your vegetable garden and landscape.

Finally, consider you are part of the water cycle. Ground and surface water supplies originate with the rain that falls on the land and is captured by complex, large-scale ecological processes involving many variables, including plants, animals, soils and geology.

When these natural processes function optimally, floods are reduced, aquifers are replenished, and more water is available for our enjoyment and consumption.

The unmet water demands of today are being compounded by a rapidly expanding population. As such, water conservation and land stewardship have become increasingly important factors in growing the existing water supply for tomorrow.

In doing so, we might forever preserve the natural scenic beauty, the native wildlife and the local historic and cultural heritage of the Hill Country, all of which we owe to the clear-running water from the seeps and springs of the Trinity aquifer system.

Michalec is a member of the Hill Country Alliance Board of Directors and Water Team Leader. The Hill Country Alliance is a nonprofit organization whose purpose is to raise public awareness and build community support around the need to preserve the natural resources and heritage of the Central Texas Hill Country. www.hillcountryalliance.org