

Imagine the Texas Hill Country future generations will inherit...

Photo By: Jerry Jilek



A place where neighbors work together to protect all that defines this special region.

The mission of the Hill Country Alliance is to bring together an ever-expanding alliance of groups and individuals throughout the Texas Hill Country with the long-term objective of protecting our open spaces, water supply, water quality, and unique character.

Background

The Texas Hill Country is known for spring-fed streams, spectacular beauty, ecological diversity, recreation, tourism, family farms, charming towns and heritage ranch lands. Families who have lived here for generations and those who have moved here more recently share a strong “sense of place” and emotional connection to the region.

The Hill Country provides economic benefits to the entire state of Texas. People move here, do business here, and visit here because of the quality of life, attractiveness, and special allure of the Hill Country.

The beauty and natural resources that make this region precious to all Texans are at risk. There simply is not an endless supply of clean water in our springs, creeks and lakes, nor endless Hill Country vistas, wide open spaces, rural landscapes, or scenic roadways.

We are rapidly losing heritage ranches and agriculture lands and all they give back to Texas. Our population is growing exponentially, creating development pressures further outside of Austin and San Antonio. Ninety percent of the Hill Country landscape is in unincorporated areas where development regulations are minimal or non-existent due to a lack of local planning, lack of funding and state law constraints.

Groundwater is being depleted, water quality is declining, rivers are over-allocated and while water policy in Texas is evolving, the consumption of water is outpacing the carrying capacity of the natural landscape. Ranchers are noticing that it is taking longer for springs and stock tanks to bounce back after rains return. Lake levels are remaining dangerously low for extended periods of time. The consequences we face from this overconsumption are irreversible, and the damages ultimately diminish property values, deplete and degrade water supply, hinder economic stability and affect quality of life for everyone throughout the region.

Fortunately, there are many individuals, businesses, landowners and organizations stepping up to take responsibility and answering a call to action on behalf of this great region. We can accommodate new growth and development in ways that are compatible with the landscape. We can conserve land and water. We can do our parts individually and collectively.

The Hill Country Alliance (HCA) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization created in 2005 to bring organizations and people together to address Hill Country challenges and build consensus towards a better way forward.



Photo By: Mike Murphy



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Long-Range Objectives

- 1) **Sustain water supplies** by realizing a water policy framework that protects groundwater in a way that keeps Hill Country springs healthy and recognizes natural water catchment boundaries, commonly referred to as watersheds.
- 2) **Conserve land for future generations** using incentives, conservation easements and purchase of development rights programs. Currently less than 4 percent of the entire 11-million-acre region is permanently protected.
- 3) **Make sustainable land stewardship practices the norm** with a focus on native vegetation, healthy riparian areas, aquifer recharge and sustainable agriculture and ranching.



Photo By: Steve Coyle

- 4) **Facilitate sound science and innovative research** to advance our understanding of the threats and opportunities facing our natural and cultural resources in the future.
- 5) **Offer new ways to development** that are water neutral, appropriate for their water catchment area and tread lightly on the landscape.
- 6) **Cultivate a network or networks of organizations** that set targets and accomplish clearly defined measurable goals by combining resources.
- 7) **Empower a community of citizens** who decide to change their behavior as a result of our work, who teach others to do the same and who become involved with Hill Country issues and organizations.

Where HCA Works

The HCA study area includes the region from Austin south along the I-35 corridor to San Antonio, west past Uvalde and Junction and north to Llano. This area encompasses more than 11 million acres in 17 counties including Bandera, Bexar, Blanco, Burnet, Comal, Edwards, Hays, Gillespie, Kerr, Kendall, Kimble, Llano, Mason, Medina, Real, Travis, and Uvalde.

An estimated 95 percent of this area is held in private ownership. While we commonly refer to county lines as we define this geography, it's the natural water catchment boundaries and aquifer recharge areas that matter most. HCA's outreach includes areas west of these 17 counties, where some of the water systems in the Hill Country originate.



2015 – 2017 Goals

#1: Bring science and community influence to Hill Country water planning efforts.

Strategies

- Build community awareness and unity within each major water catchment area (river basin watershed) through landowner outreach programs.
- Work in partnership with the science community, agencies and higher education institutions to better understand Hill Country hydrology and how to manage water for long-term ecosystem health.
- Participate productively in ongoing local, state and regional water planning processes.
- Educate and advocate for:
 - Rainwater harvesting as a viable water supply
 - Groundwater policy (DFCs and GMA decisions) that keep springs flowing
 - Healthy, empowered, well-funded groundwater conservation districts
 - Green infrastructure and modern low impact and water neutral water management strategies
 - Groundwater and surface water policy and planning integration
 - Land use, land conservation and land development considerations in long-term water planning efforts
 - Water quality protection, including the enhancement and enforcement of storm water runoff rules as well as a careful eye on effluent discharge permits and water quality standards

#2: Advance strategic regional land conservation and stewardship

Strategies

- Build awareness and common acceptance for conservation easements.
- Attract conservation funding to the Hill Country to support strategic land protection projects.
- Develop/facilitate large landscape-scale conservation efforts.
- Provide outreach support and educational resources for rural farm and ranch landowners.
- Encourage strategic land conservation and stewardship efforts within water catchment areas working with networks of land trusts, landowner organizations and agencies.
- Build consensus for place-based, best-vegetative-management practices on the land that enhance long-term water supply.
- Educate and advocate for purchase of development rights (PDR) funding at the local and state level.



#3: Evolve land development practices and rules to be more protective of the region's long-term property values as well as cultural, historical, natural and scenic assets

Strategies

- Provide education about and demonstration opportunities for conservation-oriented and low-impact development practices.
- Support community-driven, night-sky-friendly lighting efforts.
- Support partners that focus on scenic protection including reducing billboard proliferation.
- Encourage and support local jurisdictions to enact and enforce development rules to the best of their ability and identify where gaps in regulatory oversight exist, particularly in the unincorporated areas.
- Participate in infrastructure decisions regarding waterlines, roads, and transmission lines, with an eye toward financial merit and cumulative effects on the region long-term.

#4: Expand our role as respected convener and broaden our outreach capabilities and education program.

Strategies

- Stay true to the Alliance mission by building relationships with diverse organizations and a growing network of collaborative, strategic partners.
- Layout a vision for the Hill Country that moves us all forward.
- Expand the HCA Business Council.
- Initiate social science research to get to the core of some of the most challenging issues we face.
- Continuously improve and expand HCA educational events, issue papers, maps, radio and video products, website and newsletters
- Work with schools and youth-oriented programs to provide education and motivation for future generations.
- Provide support to Alliance partners by sharing resources including funding options.
- Create opportunities for people throughout to make meaningful contributions by participating in HCA's issue teams.
- Include music, art, poetry and photography to develop creative, inspiring educational products



How HCA Works

People become involved when issues hit close to home - when wells run dry, municipal water supplies are at risk, transmission lines are proposed through private lands, billboards multiply along a favorite scenic road, lakes decline, springs stop flowing, industrial projects rob neighboring landowners of property value and quality of life, and once crystal clear creeks are no longer safe for swimming. When this happens, HCA is ready to help by providing support, strength, resources and connections.

We are inclusive and work collaboratively with a broad range of partners to share resources, set common goals, and reduce redundancy.

We host conversations in all shapes and sizes to foster education and understanding between people of different interests, different values and different perspectives.

We are brokers of ideas and agents for change.

We recognize the next generation must be educated, involved and empowered.

We have a broad geographical scope to foster big-picture, regional thinking.

We are keenly focused on bridging gaps that keep people from finding solutions. We're committed to breaking through the dividing lines that too often exist between rural and urban cultures, and across county lines, between small towns and political parties.

Our work is to unite and educate people, "for the Hill Country."

We take science seriously and involve the best scientists in our work.

We are adaptive and responsive to the ever-changing needs and issues of our region. We develop educational resources including our own strong web presence, studies, newsletters, conferences, events, photography and maps to develop a more informed and active Hill Country community.

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We have a strong public outreach program and remain connected regularly with elected officials, the media, and the public on all issues related to growth in the Hill Country region.

We are a lean and frugal organization, full of passion, spiritual energy and joyful optimism.



Photo By: Gary Regner



Photo By: Dolph McCranie



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Guiding Principles

The Hill Country Alliance is dedicated to ensuring for future generations an opportunity to enjoy the unique features of the Hill Country region, including the countless spring-fed streams, its multi-ethnic and agricultural heritage, and spectacular scenic beauty.

Encourage responsible water practices – The economy of the Hill Country and land values are dependent upon the water needs of today being balanced among current users – for example, ranching development, and the environment, in a way that does no harm to the rivers, streams, springs and aquifers.

Inform the people of the Hill Country – A key to solving our region's challenges is to work collaboratively with all interested stakeholders in order to make honest and fair information readily available and to create opportunities for participation in decisions about the region.

Teams Make Things Happen

Water Team – Water science and policy experts and enthusiasts representing a wide array of organizations vet and guide the HCA water program

Night Sky Team – Landowners, astronomers, business owners and experts create educational resources and make night sky policy recommendations

Land Conservation Team – Regional land trusts coordinate to educate landowners about conservation easements, track conservation metrics and consider conservation priorities

Rainwater Harvesting Team –RWH experts create educational programs and the annual Rainwater Revival Event

Nurture unified support for innovative policy changes – While the actions needed to sustain the Hill Country's natural features vary across the region—from the rapidly urbanizing southern and eastern portions, to the vast open spaces on the western and northern edges—there is a shared interest in respecting private property rights and encouraging locally grown solutions to complex issues through education.

Support economic development that is compatible with the Hill Country's unique features – A key to keeping our Hill Country a special place for generations to come is to promote sources of income and financial stability for landowners and businesses so that ensuing generations are motivated to keep ranches intact and small towns functional.



Photo By: Todd Abbott Winters

Pedernales Team – Conservation organizations, landowners and agencies working in the Pedernales River Basin set common goals and coordinate educational efforts, research projects, water quality monitoring and landowner outreach programs

Technical Advisory Team – Engineers, hydrologists, geologist and other experts provide ongoing technical review of HCA's program

Land Practices Team – Land restoration specialists, ecologists, wildlife biologists, volunteers and professionals, share experience and vet HCA programs related to vegetative management and land stewardship



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