

2025 HILL COUNTRY LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

Rooted in Resilience

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 25 • CAMP LUCY • DRIPPING SPRINGS, TEXAS



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| 8:00-8:45 | Breakfast and Networking |
| 8:45-9:00 | Welcome and Opening Remarks |
| 9:00-9:30 | The Challenges of Hill Country Climate
<i>In some ways, the climate of the Hill Country is an oasis from the rest of Texas. In other ways, its climate presents particularly acute challenges, such as droughts and floods. We can learn much from nearly two centuries of weather and climate events about what's possible, and we can use climate models and physical science to get a sense of what new possibilities may emerge.</i>
John Nielsen-Gammon – Texas A&M University |
| 9:30-10:15 | Our Regional Future: A Conversation with Local Leaders
<i>Across the Hill Country, communities of all sizes are facing decisive threats - be they historic drought, land fragmentation, unchecked development, or flash flooding. These challenges can only be met by locally driven solutions, crafted by leaders who understand the singular nature of the region's ecological and economic health. This panel will explore the different solutions leaders have deployed to help their communities respond to present needs and build resilience for the future.</i>
Moderator: Mayor Pro Tempore Emily Kirchner, City of Fredericksburg
Panelists: Judge Bella Rubio, Real County Commissioner Damon Beierle, Burnet County Drew Paxton, City of Kerrville |
| 10:15-10:45 | NETWORKING BREAK |
| 10:45-11:50 | KEYNOTE: Leading in an Era of Upheaval
<i>In this keynote address, Angela will share stories from communities all over the world where people have faced the unthinkable and gone on together to rebuild their lives and communities in ways that allowed them to call the new place home, again. Rebuilding together from the ground up is the life-changing challenge Central Texas communities are facing today. Together, we will explore steps and stages on this path to re-creation – recognizable milestones along the way, a pattern that is somewhat universal, leaders who have a set of common behaviors, and wisdom from people who've led through all kinds of upheaval. Our reality is on the ground, not in the headlines – and the leaders we need are already here.</i>
Angela Blanchard – City of Houston (retired) |
| 11:50-1:00 | Hill Country Alliance Video Debut: We're for the Hill Country |
| 12:00 -1:00 | LUNCH BREAK |
| 1:00-1:30 | Heart of the Hill Country Award honoring Becky Etzler and Elizabeth Bowerman |
| 1:30-2:15 | Water-wise Development in the Hill Country
<i>Water availability and development pressure – two challenges central to our lives and work across the region. This panel brings together development and design professionals to explore how water plays an integral role in the growth in the Texas Hill Country.</i> |

Panelists will discuss both the challenges and opportunities of implementing water-wise development, highlighting key barriers to adoption as well as strategies that can help advance more sustainable practices across the region.

Moderator: Chandler Crouch, Texas Water Trade

Panelists: Skip Preble, Land Analytics | Carlotta McLean, Peregrine Land Investments | Cameron Campbell, Campbell Landscape Architecture

2:15-2:30 MINI-NETWORKING BREAK

2:30-3:15 Land Stewardship Lessons for Droughts and Floods

The Hill Country is known for being a land of stark contrasts. That reality has been felt more acutely this year than any other in recent memory. What can we do—as land stewards, residents, and conservation champions—to strengthen the natural infrastructure of the Hill Country? And just what is a resilient landscape? This panel will cover universal land stewardship lessons for resilient open spaces, lessons learned from Hill Country challenges, and emphasize both rural and urban perspectives.

Moderator: Ryan McGillicuddy, Texas Parks and Wildlife

Panelists: Shelby Taber, Upper Guadalupe River Authority | Daniel Oppenheimer, Hill Country Alliance | Joan Bryant, San Antonio River Authority

3:15-3:45 From Sacred Mountains to Space Telescopes: Navigating Two Worlds of Astronomy

While the challenges our region faces vary, we are united by a view that connects us across space and time with those who have called the Hill Country (and beyond) home from time immemorial - our view of the stars at night. During this presentation, we will learn both about modern astronomy research and what lessons and insights can be drawn from Navajo cosmology and cultural practices, and how these might inspire a broader audience to think differently about our relationship to place, time, and community.

Cody Cly, University of Texas - San Antonio

3:45-3:55 Reflections on Water in the 2025 Legislative Session

The 2025 legislative session – and special sessions – covered a lot of ground. With nearly 9,000 bills filed, we'll run through the biggest wins and opportunities for water in the State of Texas, including all you need to know about Proposition 4 on the ballot this November.

Sarah Schlessinger, Texas Water Foundation

3:55-4:15 Lightning Round: The Ties that Bind – 5 minutes each

- Protecting Texas Treasures from Harmful Quarrying – *Fermin Ortiz, Save Burnet*
- Local Impacts from the First Night Sky Preservation Fund – *Martha Noell, Lampasas County Friends of the Night Sky*
- In the Path of Development: Planting Seeds for the Future – *Ashley Landry, Native Plant Rescue Project*

4:15-4:30 Closing Presentation—A Look Ahead for the Hill Country

Katherine Romans, Hill Country Alliance

4:30-6:30 HAPPY HOUR NETWORKING RECEPTION

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John Nielsen-Gammon, Texas State Climatologist – Texas A&M University

John Nielsen-Gammon is a Regents Professor at Texas A&M University, Director of the Southern Regional Climate Center, and the Texas State Climatologist. Dr. Nielsen-Gammon conducts research on large-scale and local-scale weather, climate, and air pollution, with a focus on intense rainfall and droughts. He teaches courses in weather analysis and forecasting, climate, climate change, and computer modeling. He grew up in Northern California and went to school in Massachusetts, receiving a Ph.D. from MIT in 1990. He joined the faculty of Texas A&M University in 1991 and was appointed Texas State Climatologist by then-Governor George W. Bush in 2000. He was named a Fellow of the American Meteorological Society in 2011 and a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 2023 and recently completed a two-year term as President of the American Association of State Climatologists.



Judge Bella Rubio – Real County

Judge Rubio is a fourth-generation resident, born and raised in Real County. In 1996, she was elected to the position of County and District Clerk of Real County. During her tenure as Clerk, she served on several State-wide committees until retirement in 2016. In 2015, she was selected "Clerk of the Year" for the State of Texas by her Clerk colleagues. In 2018, she was honored and humbled to be elected as Real County's first Hispanic and female judge. She joined the HCA Board in 2023 after participating in the Hill Country Leadership Institute.



Commissioner Damon Beierle – Burnet County

Damon Beierle has served as Pct 2 Commissioner in Burnet County since 2019. Damon recently completed the VG Young Institute's Leadership Academy for Commissioners Courts. Raised in Burnet County, Damon has served on several non-profit boards across several areas including CASA for the Highland Lakes, Burnet Chamber of Commerce, Bertram Chamber of Commerce, Burnet Rodeo Association, The Rotary Club of Burnet, The Burnet Education Foundation as well as several other committees serving the community.



Emily Kirchner, Mayor Pro Tempore– City of Fredericksburg

Emily Kirchner serves as Mayor Pro Tem in Fredericksburg and is a founding board member of the Fredericksburg Parks Foundation, advocating for places where community grows. She is the Vice President of Economic Development at Texas Regional Bank, where she works to bridge the gap between public and private sectors at the local, state, and federal levels. Emily is a graduate of Texas A&M and the LBJ School of Public Affairs and was a member of HCA's first Hill Country Leadership Institute.



Drew Paxton, Planning Director – City of Kerrville

Drew Paxton is the Director of Planning and Development for the City of Kerrville. Paxton received his bachelor's degree in Architecture from Texas Tech University and Masters in Business from Schreiner University. He has been with the City of Kerrville for 5 years. Paxton spends time as a clown with the Alzafar Shriners. Much of his spare time is spent with his wife, La'Cee and two girls outdoors at the river or in his woodshop.



Angela Blanchard, Former Chief Resilience Officer – City of Houston

Angela is an evolutionary leader and visionary problem-solver with a whole-systems approach to caring for people facing the unthinkable. Her breakthrough strategies have revitalized neighborhoods and supported disaster recovery at the city, state, and regional levels, offering a roadmap for business, civic, and nonprofit leaders tackling complex challenges of community transformation, long-term recovery, and resettlement. Over her 40-year career, Angela has worked with leaders on six continents and has received numerous awards and recognition for her work, from Hurricane Katrina in 2005 to supporting flood recovery efforts in North Carolina in 2024.



Chandler Crouch, PE Net Zero Water Program Lead - Texas Water Trade

Chandler Crouch is a civil engineer and has spent a decade supporting Texans' access to clean drinking water. His experience ranges from community scale impacts while serving in the US Peace Corps, to supporting rollout of capital improvement projects as a municipal consultant. Now working with the non-profit, Texas Water Trade, Chandler leads the Net Zero Water Program which aims to accelerate the adoption and replication of sustainable water practices at the building scale to facilitate growth while adding water resiliency.



Skip Preble, President – Land Analytics

Skip earned his Texas Real Estate license when he was just 17 years old and has never looked back. He has more than 3 decades of diverse real estate experience including acquisitions, master planned community development, land development, residential and light commercial construction, as well as valuation, feasibility and marketability analysis. He has worked with clients nationwide, including Neumann Homes, John Laing Homes (NAHB 2003 Builder of the Year), and Simonini Homes (NAHB 2005 Builder of the Year), and has consulted on major real estate litigation cases and redevelopment projects. Skip enjoys public outreach and has presented at multiple industry conferences and published articles on real estate development and business management.



Carlotta McLean, Founding Partner – Peregrine Land Investments

Carlotta is a fifth (5th)-generation Austinite who began her land brokerage career in 1994. Her background spans a range of land transactions including residential, commercial, ranch and investment properties. She is a graduate of the University of Texas at Austin. Carlotta is active in the community serving as past president of Austin Commercial Real Estate Society and on the board of the Colorado River Land Trust; she has also provided board service to Robinson Family Management, Hill Country Conservancy and the Real Estate Council of Austin. She is a member of the Urban Land Institute, Texas Alliance of Land Brokers, the Real Estate Council of Austin, and the Austin Board of Realtors.



Cameron Campbell, President – Campbell Landscape Architecture

With more than a decade of national and international project experience, Cameron Campbell's work strives to create landscapes that complement architecture, art, community and ecological systems of various scales and clientele. Cameron's leadership role at CLA engages all phases of design and construction administration. His work is site specific and committed to the pursuit of timeless and engaging landscape spaces. Cameron received a Bachelor of Arts in

Biology from The University of Texas at Austin, and a Master of Landscape Architecture from The University of Texas at Austin School of Architecture. Prior to founding Campbell Landscape Architecture in 2017, Cameron worked for Peter Walker and Partners in Berkeley, California and Ten Eyck Landscape Architects in Austin.



Ryan McGillicuddy, Watershed Conservation Team Leader – Texas Parks and Wildlife Department

Ryan McGillicuddy is a Conservation Biologist and the Watershed Conservation Team Leader for the Inland Fisheries Division of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Based at the Texas River Center in San Marcos, he has been with the Department for 18 years and specializes in the conservation and restoration of streams and riparian areas. He and his team provide technical guidance and

resources to landowners and river stewards throughout the state, with a special emphasis on the Edwards Plateau and Trans Pecos ecoregions.



Shelby Taber, Natural Resources Manager – Upper Guadalupe River Authority

Shelby Taber is the Natural Resources Manager for the Upper Guadalupe River Authority. Her department conducts water quality monitoring, outreach and education, and administers watershed stewardship programs. Shelby received her Bachelor of Science in Geography Resource and Environmental Studies from Texas State University and her Master of Science in Environment and Natural Resources from Ohio State University. She joined the UGRA team in 2022.



Daniel Oppenheimer, Land Program Director – Hill Country Alliance

Since 2017, Daniel has overseen HCA's Land Program, working with private landowners and partner organizations to support private land stewardship and conservation across the Texas Hill Country. Daniel also serves as Coordinator of the Camp Bullis Sentinel Landscape Partnership. Prior to joining HCA, Daniel worked for the Tamarisk Coalition, coordinating the Dolores River Restoration Partnership in southwestern Colorado and eastern Utah, and for the Nueces River

Authority, implementing riparian restoration projects on the Sabinal and Nueces Rivers. He has nearly fifteen years of experience leading, supporting, and advising collaborative initiatives to conserve natural resources.



Joan Bryant, PE, Engineer – San Antonio River Authority

Joan Bryant is a licensed water resources engineer with the San Antonio River Authority. She holds a B.S. in Engineering from St. Mary's University and an M.S. in Water Resources Engineering from University of Texas in San Antonio. With seven years of experience in both the public and private sectors, Joan has focused her career on flooding, drainage infrastructure, stream restoration, and nature-based solutions. A San Antonio native, she is passionate about advancing sustainable

practices that strengthen the resilience of her community.

**Cody Cly, PhD Candidate – University of Texas at San Antonio**

Cody is a PhD candidate at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), where his research focuses on laboratory studies of materials analogous to stardust. His work aims to bridge laboratory research and observational astronomy to better understand the types of dust that may exist around asymptotic giant branch (AGB) stars. As a first-generation Diné (Navajo) astrophysicist, Cody is committed to raising awareness of Indigenous perspectives in astronomy and fostering

understanding across communities.

**Sarah Schlessinger, CEO - Texas Water Foundation**

Sarah Rountree Schlessinger is the CEO of Texas Water Foundation, a statewide nonpartisan nonprofit that works in water policy, workforce and leadership initiatives, and statewide water campaigns. She previously worked in groundwater policy and regulation and has experience with international nonprofits and disaster response. Sarah currently serves as an appointed member of the Water Conservation Advisory Council and as a board member for Open ET.

**Fermin Ortiz, Spokesperson – Save Burnet**

Fermin has been helping his community oppose ill-sited aggregates production operations in Llano and Burnet Counties for 8 years through local groups including Save Sandy Creek, Save Lake LBJ, and Save Burnet. He is also a co-founder of the statewide Texans for Responsible Aggregate Mining (TRAM) coalition. He serves on the Board of Directors of the Central Texas Electric Cooperative and is a business owner in Marble Falls. He lives and ranches in the Sandy Creek area of Llano County.

**Martha Noell, Volunteer – Lampasas County Friends of the Night Sky**

Martha Noell is a seasoned nonprofit and community leader with more than 35 years of experience in chamber of commerce management, economic development, nature tourism and heritage preservation. She has led award-winning community initiatives, secured major grants, and directed projects that preserved historic sites and advanced tourism. Actively engaged in conservation and regional cooperation, she serves on the boards of Lampasas County Friends of the Night Sky and Forward Lampasas, continuing her lifelong work of building

strong, sustainable communities.

**Ashley Landry, Founder– Native Plant Rescue Project**

Ashley Landry is the founder of the Native Plant Rescue Project (NPRP), which is a Central Texas-based nonprofit that coordinates plant rescues prior to construction. She was the 2024 Nancy Benedict Memorial Award winner and has been featured in Wildflower magazine, NPAT's Prairie People, The Austin Chronicle, Vibrante magazine and on Central Texas Gardener. Ashley is an avid iNaturalist user and enjoys spending her free time botanizing.



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HEART OF THE HILL COUNTRY

HONORING HILL COUNTRY CONSERVATION CHAMPIONS

The Heart of The Hill Country Award was created by HCA in 2019 to recognize and thank our region's greatest natural resource champions. This year's honorees are Becky Etzler and Elizabeth Bowerman – two women who have nurtured and led impactful conservation and environmental education organizations in their communities.

Becky and Elizabeth will be presented with a beautiful award, designed and crafted by Hill Country artist J.J. Priour using Cordova limestone and glass. Much like the limestone used in his art, Priour has deep ties to the Hill Country and his late father Damian was instrumental to the formation of the Hill Country Alliance.



Becky Etzler: Executive Director - Riverside Nature Center

Becky has dedicated over 10 years to nurturing and leading the Riverside Nature Center, which provides educational opportunities and activities to children and adults from throughout Kerr County and broader region. Through her work, Becky is especially proud of the opportunity to help children cultivate a sense of environmental conscience. She brings a passion and enthusiasm for the wonders of nature to her work and enjoys facilitating educational programs for all ages. Becky has been instrumental in the Riverside Nature Center's ability to grow new partnerships, provide one-of-a-kind programming, and develop the facilities of this Hill Country gem located on the Guadalupe River.

Outside of her work at the nature center, she serves as a Board Member of the Kerr County Friends of the Night Sky and as an advisor to the Kerr County Water Alliance. In the wake of the 2025 floods, it has been clearer than ever how beloved Becky and the Riverside Nature Center are and how invaluable they are to Kerrville.



Elizabeth Bowerman: Founding Board Member - Comal Conservation

Elizabeth has spent more than two decades as a volunteer and conservation leader in Central Texas, most notably with Comal Conservation. Here, Elizabeth served as founding Vice President and then as President for six years. During this period, Elizabeth was instrumental in guiding the group from its grassroots beginning through hiring a full-time Executive Director in 2023. During this time, Comal Conservation became an invaluable champion for conservation and community engagement. By focusing on engaging not only the public at large, but also local governmental and business leaders, the organization continues to bring a needed spotlight and momentum to conservation issues across Comal County.

Originally from the east coast, Elizabeth fell in love with the Texas Hill Country while traveling through the area in 1996 and decided to make Texas her home. Since arriving, Elizabeth has been active in nature and conservation groups, learning, teaching and passing along her passion for nature in organizations like Native Plant Society and the Texas Master Naturalists. She is inspired every day by the dedicated conservation professionals and volunteers working throughout the Hill Country to protect this unique region.



Support the Hill Country Alliance!

Inspired by the stories, the people, and the information you gathered today? Donate to support our work! Simply **scan the QR code at left or go to bit.ly/Summit25Donations** and follow the prompts to make your donation.

Every dollar you give goes directly to conservation efforts for the lands, waters, communities, and night skies of our special part of Texas.

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Lunch

LAKE FLATO

Tres and Lida Plummer

Breakfast



Reception

Michelle Whitwell Pokorny



Steve and Melinda Winn

Woodland



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