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October 21, 2013

Honorable Julian Castro, Mayor,
Heriberto Guerra, Chairman,
Robert Puente, President & CEO, and
Members of the Board of Trustees
San Antonio Water System
2800 U.S. Highway 281 North
San Antonio, Texas 78212

Re: Long-term consequences of major water withdrawals from western Hill Country groundwater resources.

Dear Mayor Castro, Chairman Guerra, Mr. Puente and Trustees,

You have before you a proposal to acquire groundwater from Val Verde and Kinney Counties. On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Hill Country Alliance, our 130 regional and technical advisors and more than 5,000 supporters throughout 17 counties of the Texas Hill Country region, we ask that you not select this source of water supply for San Antonio.

The Hill Country Alliance is dedicated to ensuring for future generations an opportunity to enjoy the Texas Hill Country region's spring-fed streams. These springs, creeks and rivers are essential to the unique character of the Hill Country.

Water is the economic and ecologic lifeblood of the Texas Hill Country. Its availability for home life, agriculture, recreation, and business depends on a healthy natural water cycle—dependent on intact, interconnected aquifers, springs, streams, and rivers. The Texas Hill Country is experiencing exceptional drought conditions. Varying and unpredictable weather patterns resulting in prolonged periods of sparse rainfall are part of the climatological norm in the Hill Country and western Texas and will present long-term challenges for the foreseeable future.

Healthy springs are a barometer for healthy water systems. Although Texas water policy has yet to formally make the groundwater-surface water connection, anyone who has experienced the magic of a Hill Country spring nourishing a stream can see the importance of keeping our springs flowing. The only way to do this is to properly manage groundwater.

Removal of these substantial quantities of groundwater from the Rio Grande Basin would not only have a dramatic effect on the western Hill Country and lower Rio Grande Valley, it would set precedent that it is acceptable public policy for a municipality to fulfill its supply needs at an environmental cost of the ruination of historic springs. Our understanding is that it is not your intention to import water at the expense of the sending region so we urge you to examine all of the science carefully.

We understand opinions have been expressed to you assuring you that the groundwater resources of Kinney and Val Verde are vast, and these springs and streams will be unaffected by withdrawals to San Antonio and San Angelo. To the contrary, research done by the Southwest Research Institute (SwRI) confirms what drought conditions already suggest. For instance, SwRI scientists have concluded that with groundwater production of perhaps less than 14,000 acre feet, Las Moras Springs go dry; in May of this year Las Moras Creek did in fact cease to flow. Regarding Val Verde County, the latest research by SwRI concluded this year, revealed a strong correlation between high capacity wells and close proximity to the Devils River, thus showing "preferential flow pathways that developed coincident with river channels." Lake Amistad, which is dependent upon these Devils River flows, this year reached near historic lows.

Although these landscapes and water resources are on the fringe of the Hill Country, we believe they are at the heart of a critical policy question, namely whether municipal water supply desires warrant the destruction of historic springs. This question should be asked as you explore all three of your options. Our message regarding Val Verde water does not endorse support for the other two proposals before you.

As discussed just this week at the Energy/Water Forum, there is disconnect between future development expansion, demand projections, lack of land use consideration and environmental consequences worth dealing with before simply taking from one region to grow another.

You have a history and reputation for leading with regional water conservation and innovation strategies. HCA appreciates the tremendous success you've had in being a role model for water conservation in Texas. Again, we encourage you not to source groundwater from Val Verde and Kinney Counties at their expense. We welcome further dialog with you moving forward and would be happy to meet with you in person.

Respectfully,



Milan J. Michalec
President



Christy Muse
Executive Director

Hill Country Alliance - Guiding Principles and Values

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, e.g. ranchers, development and the environment, in such a way that does no harm to the streams and aquifers.

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

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 for landowners and businesses so that ensuing generations are motivated to keep ranches intact and small towns functional.