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water

# Texas Counties Must Get the 'Big Picture'

Example: Kerr County Plans Rainwater Harvesting Reservoir for Exhibition Center

#### Some Water Background

Kerrville and much of our Texas Hill Country, has a limited amount of water to spare-either groundwater or surface water. Folks visiting the region, one of the most scenic in Texas, often don't go home with that picture in their minds. Creeks and rivers seem to be plentiful in many years and it is a region of sometimes major flooding. These streams form because many of the sometimes porous and cracked rock formations in the region capture recharging rains and flood waters. These rock formations commonly leak water or produce springs-anywhere from thousands of small seeps in these counties up to the two largest flowing springs in Texas at New Braunfels and San Marcos. Other large springs are also found along the edges of the Hill Country and Balcones Escarpment such as Austin's Barton Springs, Fort Clark's Las Moras Springs and San Antonio's now "wet weather" springs which once formed the vigorous headwaters of the San Antonio River. Pumping from the aquifers supporting these springs increased dramatically from the early 1900s to now. The catchment area for supporting these large springs and the hundreds of thousands of small springs and seeps across the Hill Country is semi-arid in climate and very prone to drought as much of this last decade has shown residents. The year 2011 was the Texas record for both hottest and driest in recorded history. But, don't forget, these small rural springs are also very prone to drying up from increased aquifer pumping.

In recent decades many of the Central Edwards Plateau counties (aka the Hill





Rainwater Harvesting system at Culberson County Courthouse in Van Horn, Texas

Country) have boomed in population, growth and tourism activity. With many of the new area residents, including many retirees, coming from wetter and large urban regions, their knowledge of Southwestern water conservation and water management has left much to be desired in promoting sustainability in the region. Many ranches, large and small, are now owned and "managed" by absentee owners or owners with almost no agricultural knowledge. Ashe juniper, liveoak and mesquite now dominate many ranch landscapes, which affect water resources dramatically, as you all know.

Also, Austin has exploded west into the prettier hilly terrain and likewise San Antonio has pushed ever northward into the Hill Country. And new residents are always demanding plenty of cheap water from the water utilities. Large, lush home landscapes are installed on steep, rocky hills using a lot of cheap water. It seems both large cities have tried to meet in the middle along clogged Interstate 35, with San Marcos and New Braunfels absorbing much of that new growth and water demand.

Adjoining counties and towns such as Blanco, Fredericksburg, Boerne, Bandera and Kerrville now have large populations of newcomers compared to the 1950s when the last major long-term drought hit Texas



in the gut (it lasted 8 to 10 years). With current and projected populations, the Hill Country, along with Austin and San Antonio, would suffer greatly with a repeat of that drought as described in Elmer Kelton's "The Time It Never Rained." If you have not yet, go to the library or book store and read it.

The Hill Country is no longer primarily a ranching region with scattered farming which once supported local family's herds of cattle, sheep, Angora goats and native whitetail deer. Now the common highway view is of miles of high fences (sometimes) holding tens of thousands of exotic big game animals, many meat goats, some cows and a very few sheep or Angoras! The Hill Country now has thousands of new water demands from large, lush residential and business landscapes, city parks and ball fields, new and larger schools plus golf courses galore! And the push for more growth is coming constantly across much of the region, especially



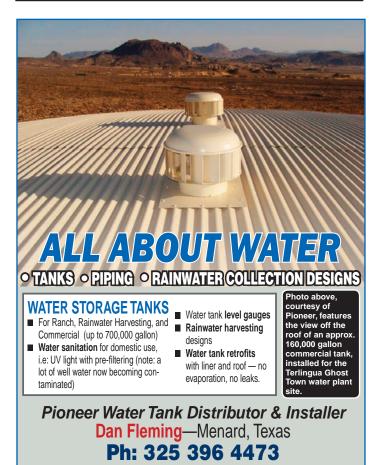
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Cotton fields in very dry Pecos County depend on rain, and ground water resources for irrigation.

the southern and eastern sections.

Agriculture as we once knew it in the area has really changed with many of the older generation retired or selling to deep pockets from the major cities—often just for hunting or as exotic big game ranches. Local youth have often moved to far away places for better paying jobs. Many smaller ranches have been broken up into subdivisions with many more straws into aquifers



and higher water use. Even some old, large ranches have sold off property for various reasons. Land stewardship and knowledge of proper watershed and rangeland management is often lacking in many of today's landowners and managers. Change has happened out in the country too, whether we wanted it or not!

#### Where Will 'New Water' Come From?

This is the \$64,000 question! In a short answer to a very tough question – there is no "new water". But, there are options to maximize and improve our water use efficiency and conservation efforts—many of them! Those are mostly for future conversations.

Something that folks living and working on the land (the catchments/watersheds and riparian areas) can do is to properly manage their ranges, farms or wildlife lands. They—or you—can assure there is good vegetative cover, not only for livestock forage or wildlife habitat, but for improving rainfall penetration in the soil while protecting the surface from erosion and drying out. Improved irrigation efficiency, growing profitable crops with lower water use and other present or future water conservation ideas will all help keep Texas' farms and ranches viable and maybe even growing. You folks are still the basic conservationists we all depend upon.

Other ideas such as the rainwater harvesting (RWH) just announced here on the Kerr County Youth Exhibition Center are very helpful at taking some of the local water demand off of aquifers and rivers. RWH is also a great educational tool in demonstrating and teaching conservationyou can see the water levels go up or down with your use and with the rains. The officials of Kerr County are to be commended along with others in Menard, Sanderson, Van Horn. Monahans and more for their implementation of RWH on county buildings. You can do the same in your county by learning more about the practice through your local AgriLife Extension Agents and then getting actively involved. Rainwater Harvesting is a very old practice that is new again and much improved! Get goingbefore the rains come!

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