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Pride, Passion and Vision in the Texas Hill Country

Written by Christy Muse
Executive Director, Hill Country Alliance

There's a lot of love and pride in the Texas Hill Country. It's a place of rugged beauty, cool, clear swimming holes, and passionate people. Putting that love, pride, and passion into action toward a common vision is what the Hill Country Alliance (HCA) is all about.

For past generations, this vast region of wide-open spaces may have seemed invincible and untamable. Caring for a Hill Country ranch has never been easy. Every drop of water must count, and the limited carrying capacity of the land is a challenge. We have seen best practices for taking care of this land evolve over the years, and it's encouraging to note the Hill Country's natural landscape today is more beautiful and healthier than it was years ago when heavily grazed.

Central Texas is experiencing some of the highest rates of growth in the country, creating a whole new set of issues for the landowner community. We are losing working lands and wide-open spaces at an alarming rate—partly because of development pressure and partly because the family ranch is not easy to hold on to these days. Even the most thoughtful, resourceful, well-intentioned private land stewards face a very vulnerable situation wondering how and when a development, infrastructure, or industrial project might impact their land.

People here have fought hard for generations to protect private property rights. Government regulations are seen as a burden, and, sometimes, rightfully so. However, more than 90 percent of the Hill Country landscape is in unincorporated areas where development regulations are minimal or nonexistent. A truck stop or sand operation upstream, a commercial or industrial project on the other side of the fence, a water export deal taking water out from under the land, or a road or transmission line carving a path across the landscape—all are common threats and realities for every Hill Country landowner.

Once one of these threats becomes real, it is often a surprise to landowners and citizens that local governments have no authority to deal with what can be devastating financial, emotional and ecological impacts and the long-term consequences of these degrading actions for the landowner and surrounding community.

It has become clear to us that there is a common and strong desire among Hill Country landowners to hold on to the region's unique natural qualities, heritage, character and beauty. For many landowners, protecting the value and special qualities of this region is what "protecting property rights" really means. However, simply protecting private property rights without examining more carefully what that means to our region has made thoughtful, reasonable rules for new development almost impossible.

"Property rights" advocates with only development interests in mind have been formidable opponents of attempts to establish and enforce rules proposed to protect land and water resources.

Hays County, the fastest growing county in this region, is a great place to take a closer look.

County planners and elected officials, following the demands of development-driven growth projections, are investing huge amounts of public time, money, expertise and advocacy trying to convince landowners and constituents about the need for major road and water infrastructure projects. But there is tremendous resistance to these proposals—landowners are telling their elected officials that these plans work against a consensus of broad community desires for quality of life, water supply, land protection, and long-term property values. This story plays out in community after community; it's a cycle we can't seem to break.

HCA, working alongside a network of [regional partners](#), has been vetting elements of a shared regional vision for years. Our [Collaborative Strategy](#) identifies several critical actions that must be taken in order to protect our beloved Hill Country.

Rethink our water policies

First, we need to rethink our water policies. Texas barely manages groundwater, springs are declining, and the water from our rivers is over-allocated to water rights holders under the first in time first in right doctrine. We do not have a regulatory system in place to manage water resources in a way that keeps springs flowing and water catchment systems healthy for the long term.

Resolving this situation is paramount, and there are a number of good people and organizations such as the [Texas Living Waters Project](#) and the [Meadows Center for Water and the Environment](#) working hard toward consensus and best ways to change the system we have today.

Despite the volume of important work underway related to water policy, the discussion rarely includes land use issues. Everything that happens on the land—conservation, stewardship, and development—has everything to do with our future water supply.

Strategic land conservation

Secondly, we need a significant, strategic land conservation movement. Currently less than four percent of the 11 million acre region is permanently protected. It will take a mix of conservation easements on private lands, public open spaces, and the protection of critical habitat, water features and natural areas to be successful. [Eight local land trusts working with state and national land trusts](#) have greatly increased awareness and acceptance for conservation easements. Progress for land conservation has grown significantly in the last decade, but we have a long road ahead, and while it will be expensive, the net economic benefit will be significant.

Land well stewarded

Thirdly, all land, permanently protected or not, will need to be well stewarded for the long-term health of the region. Vegetation and soil management in the uplands, healthy riparian zone stewardship, strategies for invasive species, brush control, and proactive strategies for dealing with wildfire and prolonged drought are all essential components of a successful Hill Country action plan. Land stewardship is an evolving science, and we have to get it right in order to protect the land's life-giving properties.

Thoughtful development

Fourthly, it's a given that population growth will occur in the region, therefore the intensity and location of future development must be thoughtful and planned. This makes sense not only from an ecological and quality-of-life perspective, but from an economic perspective as well.

Investing in a [rail corridor](#) from Austin to San Antonio and encouraging more density along this transit system makes perfect sense. A vision for how and where we develop will give us a blueprint for guiding infrastructure investments. Rather than committing the region to massive debt to pay for roads, waterlines, and other infrastructure projects "as demanded," we could concentrate these investments where development priorities emerge and avoid these investments where we have consensus for a conservation focus.

Take action now

And, finally, while we know these strategies are extremely challenging and will require political champions, funding sources, and new ways of thinking, we can and must take action today.

With assistance from the Cynthia and George Mitchell Foundation, HCA has launched a number of outreach programs to educate the Hill Country community about [protecting the night sky](#), [harvesting rainwater](#), and the importance of [keeping riparian areas natural](#). We are building a network of organizations that work collaboratively in this region and we provide regular educational programs to engage and empower the public to participate in regional decision-making.

The Hill Country provides economic benefits to the entire state of Texas. People relocate to, do business in, and visit the Hill Country because of the quality of life and unique beauty of the region. We can accommodate new growth and development in ways that are compatible with our fragile landscape—but we need to help gather people around the campfire, educate and open minds, and work together to make it happen—and the sooner, the better.

Christy Muse is the Executive Director of the Hill Country Alliance, a nonprofit organization whose purpose is to raise public awareness and build community support around the need to protect the natural resources and heritage of the Texas Hill Country. For more information visit www.HillCountryAlliance.org.

The views expressed by contributors to the Cynthia and George Mitchell Foundation's blogging initiative, "Achieving a Sustainable Texas," are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the foundation.

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Contact:

Christy Muse, Executive Director

Hill Country Alliance

christy@hillcountryalliance.org

512.560.3135