



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The window of opportunity to re-imagine how the Hill Country grows and how it values its natural infrastructure is shrinking. This Plan represents the voices of thousands of Texans. It defines the most critical natural infrastructure systems in the Hill Country and lays out a vision for greater investment to support those systems as the region grows. This plan is not a map of land use prohibitions, an effort to subvert private property rights, or an effort to supplant local planning. It presents a shared vision, an adaptable set of tools, and a starting point for ongoing collaboration. The Plan is intended to be flexible and adaptable to reflect the dynamism and diversity of the region.

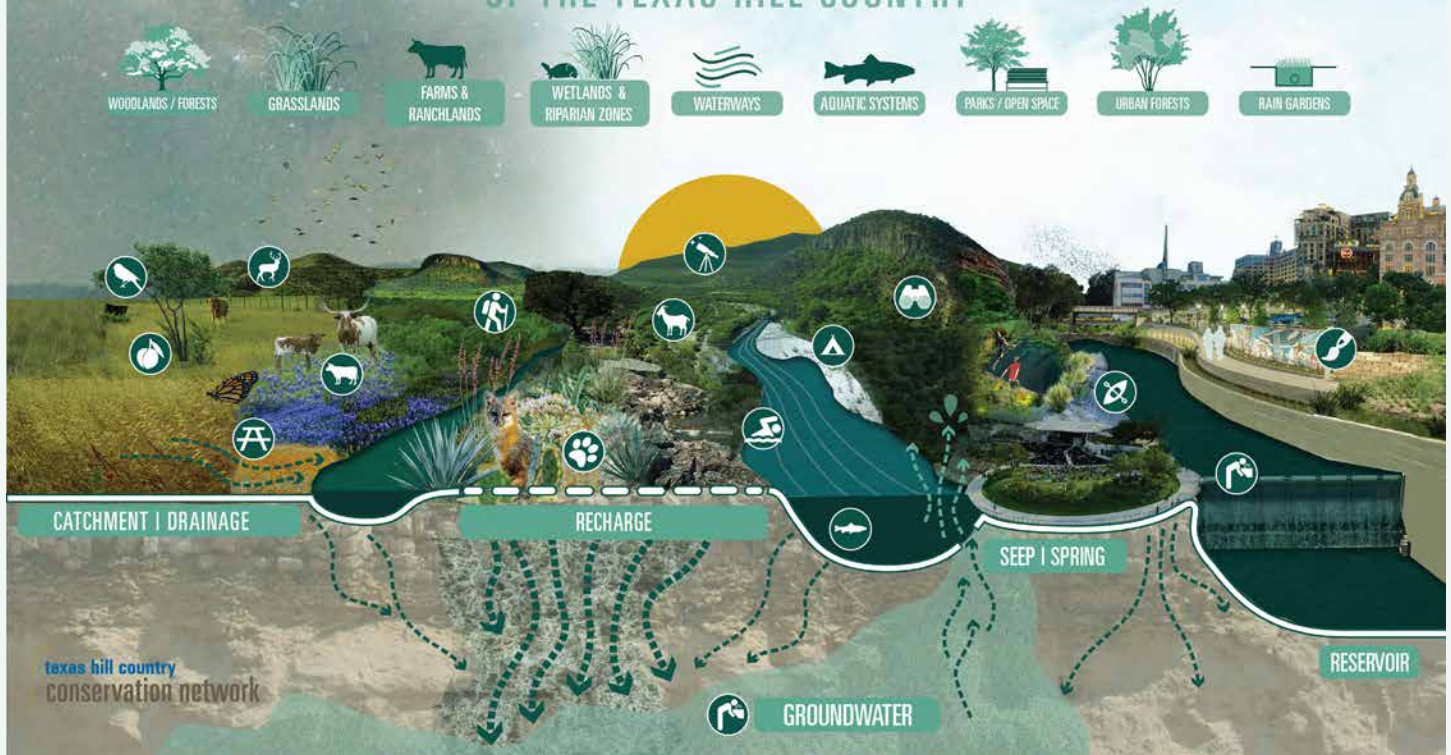
CORE MESSAGE

The Plan's core messages are:

- There is **enormous support** across Hill Country communities for **greater investment** in the region's land, water, sky, and natural infrastructure.
- The Hill Country's land, water, and sky are **deeply interconnected**, and land, water, and sky resources are all part of the region's natural infrastructure.
- Natural infrastructure **sustains communities and economies** and is as important as built infrastructure.
- Natural infrastructure is **critical to everyone** throughout the region's cities and towns, its working lands, and its most remote natural places. Protecting, maintaining, and optimizing natural infrastructure is the least expensive route to helping communities thrive.
- The benefits of natural infrastructure are not equally accessible across racial, socioeconomic, and rural/urban divides. It is important to **ensure equitable access** to the benefits of natural infrastructure and decision-making about natural infrastructure.
- **Protecting water** is the single greatest natural infrastructure priority for communities across the region.

NATURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

OF THE TEXAS HILL COUNTRY



WHAT IS NATURAL INFRASTRUCTURE?

Natural infrastructure uses, restores, or emulates natural ecological, geological, or physical processes.

It expands the concept of infrastructure beyond engineered or built structures. From healthy rangelands and soils that allow rainwater to percolate into aquifers below our feet to star-filled night skies overhead, natural infrastructure in the Hill Country is complex, interconnected, and underpins our very existence and quality of life in Central Texas and beyond. Protecting and enhancing natural infrastructure provides irreplaceable and cost-effective environmental, health, social, and economic benefits.

Natural infrastructure is the cornerstone of thriving and resilient economies and an essential foundation of community health and safety. Studies show that for every \$1 invested in conservation, \$4 to \$11 is returned in natural goods and services like clean air and water and reduced risk of flooding.^A Texas working lands provide \$629/acre/year in benefits, which totals \$89 billion annually across 141 million acres.^B Close-to-home access to green space lowers rates of major diseases and improves physical and mental health—avoiding significant health-care costs.

^A Trust for Public Land. Return on the Investment From the Land & Water Conservation Fund (2011). The economic benefits of Great Outdoors Colorado and the Conservation Trust Fund: Fact Sheet (2018). The Trust for Public Land. Vermont's return on investment in land conservation (2018).

^B Putman, A. et al. Texas Ecosystem Services: A Statewide Assessment. https://nri.tamu.edu/media/3564/texas-ecosystem-services_a-statewide-assessment-oct-2022.pdf (2022).

BENEFITS OF INVESTING IN NATURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

- Providing clean and abundant water
- Keeping farm and ranch lands intact and viable
- Preserving dark skies
- Providing places to recreate and exercise outdoors
- Providing places to fish and hunt
- Promoting biodiversity
- Reducing water treatment costs
- Generating tourism and recreation dollars
- Attracting new businesses
- Supporting pollination of crops and other plants
- Reducing wildfire risk
- Reducing drought intensity
- Providing wildlife habitat including rare and threatened species
- Promoting economic viability of rural and agricultural lands
- Collecting and storing water (aquifer recharge)
- Reducing the impacts of extreme weather
- Reducing intensity of flooding
- Reducing water and air pollution
- Reducing health impacts from extreme heat
- Creating and maintaining healthy soils
- Helping people connect with nature
- Increasing social connections
- Supporting early childhood development
- Providing places to play, gather, and spend time together
- Providing mental health benefits from spending time in nature
- Protecting culturally and spiritually sacred places
- Providing strong regional identity and sense of place

PARTNER AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FOR THIS PLAN

Thousands of Texans shared their perspectives during the planning process, including farmers and ranchers, elected officials, representatives of nonprofits and public agencies, and residents from big cities and small towns across the Hill Country. While we worked hard to achieve representative engagement, we fell short of that goal. Network partners have committed to not ending our engagement efforts with the publication of this report--this will be a living, breathing document and community outreach will continue in the coming months and years. Engagement to date has included:



THE TIME IS NOW: PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR FUNDING OF CONSERVATION AND NATURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

In the Plan's survey of over 2,800 Hill Country residents, nearly 85% of respondents said they would support increasing public funding for conservation. Public funding measures, including bond measures, utility fees, and sales tax measures, are among the most impactful and reliable ways to invest in conservation. Hill Country voters are exceptionally supportive of propositions that fund conservation. Since 1990, there have been 39 public funding measures in Hill Country cities and counties, and only one did not pass (in 1993). Of the 10 largest public funding measures for conservation that have passed in Texas, nine were in the Hill Country.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE

The success of this Plan relies on shared implementation by members of the Texas Hill Country Conservation Network and partners, landowners, and community leaders from across the region. Succeeding will take significant new investments. The Network needs to rally local communities, public agencies, businesses, chambers, developers, landowners, city dwellers, and the agricultural community around our shared responsibility to invest in conservation and natural infrastructure before it is too late. The objectives below were identified as key areas for collective action. See Section 5 of the Plan for more details.

Plan Objectives, Areas for Collective Action:

1. Accelerate the pace of conservation through permanent protection of important lands and waters.
2. Actively support conservation-based stewardship of thousands more acres of working lands through outreach, technical and financial assistance to landowners.
3. Use additional strategies to expand and deepen focus on protecting water resources.
4. Advocate for policies, including night sky ordinances, that support key natural infrastructure priorities.

5. Expand equitable access to the benefits of natural infrastructure with a focus on public health and climate resilience.
6. Build support through outreach and education.
7. Build capacity and deepen engagement through partnerships.
8. Work to increase funding for investments in natural infrastructure.

In addition to its shared vision, the Plan includes maps of potential natural infrastructure priorities that can be used as starting points for local decision making. Importantly, the Plan also includes county-level summaries to help support local efforts. The county-level summaries can be found in the Plan appendix.

Please go to www.ourtxhillcountry.org to find more ways to get involved.

Note: This Plan builds on the work represented in the State of the Hill Country Report: Eight Key Conservation and Growth Metrics for a Region at the Crossroads.



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The Texas Hill Country is the most beautiful place in North America. Keeping its natural infrastructure should be a matter of civic pride for all Texans. Clean and sustainable water is tantamount to survival for millions of Texans in this region and the diverse wildlife. We need to do all that can be done to sustain its long-term health."

- Survey Participant

Image Source: Thomas Park,
Unsplash