



**For Immediate Release**

**July 25, 2023**

**Night Skies, Our Forgotten Natural Infrastructure**  
**by Bill Neiman, Hill Country Alliance Board Member since 2010**

DRIPPING SPRINGS, Texas – We tend to take the natural world for granted, until one day we notice it's gone. Central Texas is a big place, once full of wide-open skies, infinite wildflowers, and dark, but brilliantly lit starry nights. In most places of the Hill Country, you can still see the Milky Way on a clear night. Connecting our collective view of the cosmos is one of the most precious and awe-inspiring gifts of nature. Our ability to gaze into infinity with the naked eye serves as a needed reminder of just how small we really are in the bigger scheme of things. Seeing into infinity also helps us reflect upon our actual size, and what big messes we can create.

It would be all too easy for this universal view of creation to disappear, bit by little bit. As Texans, we are obliged to take responsibility to care for and preserve this often forgotten, but important piece of natural infrastructure.

Earlier this month, the Texas Hill Country Conservation Network released the [Hill Country Land, Water, Sky, and Natural Infrastructure Plan](#), a resource that spotlights where and how natural infrastructure provides value to the natural resources of the Hill Country and its communities. However, more than a decade ago, Network partner Hill Country Alliance (HCA) helped facilitate the Hill Country's first countywide effort to preserve our night skies – a major step for this starry infrastructure.

Under leadership of then Kimble County Judge, Andrew Murr, a resolution was adopted in late 2011 supporting efforts to preserve 1,251 square miles of night skies in the western region. Earlier that year, Judge Murr working with a few HCA board members partnered with Pedernales Electric Cooperative (PEC - the largest electric coop in the US), to also take the lead by passing a similar resolution covering its expansive Central Texas service area. A collaborative partnership was deployed to voluntarily shield or replace every unwanted night light with updated, energy-saving full cut-off shielded LEDs. The unique partnership operated for one year within the Kimble County PEC service area at no cost to the landowner.

Following the successful countywide program, HCA enabled a separate initiative with the City of Junction and American Electric Power (AEP), a service provider for the small western town at the headwaters of the pristine Llano River. Over 135 streetlights were identified and retrofitted with updated, energy-saving full cut-off shielded LEDs. The

project, funded through a gift to HCA and matched by AEP, completely changed Junction's Main St district lighting from end-to-end. A 75% energy savings was realized by the city and its taxpayers, who operate the streetlights within the town limits.

Through the years since our early partnerships in Kimble County, the Hill Country Alliance has continued to play a determined and strategic role in advocating for communities across the region striving to protect their night skies from light pollution. Working persistently over time, numerous Hill Country communities have adopted well-crafted Outdoor Lighting Ordinances. Several communities, private developments, State and National Parks, and even a church retreat camp have gone the extra mile to become officially certified Dark Sky Places. These passionate local communities are recognized by the prestigious International Dark-Sky Association (IDA) based in Tucson, Arizona. HCA maintains a strong working relationship and is coordinated with IDA throughout our region.

The Texas Hill Country rates first in the nation for highest number of IDA certified locations within a single cohesive region. Looking towards the future, there are rural and incorporated communities working towards weaving these regionally protected areas into one intertwined blanket called a Dark Sky Reserve. It is hoped someday our locally woven blanket will also be recognized by IDA. We only need to look west to our neighbors in The Greater Big Bend International Dark Sky Reserve. Big Bend is the largest Dark Sky Reserve in the world, covers over 15,000 miles and is the first ever to cross international boundaries. We can envision someday the Hill Country Dark Sky Reserve could reach out to all Texans at-large with helping hands and even connect with the far western Big Bend Reserve.

While we struggle for years with intractable problems like those threatening our precious streams and springs across the Hill Country, we have proven that one form of regional pollution is within easy reach to fix.

Right at our fingertips, reducing and eliminating light pollution is almost as easy as flipping a switch. Of all the economic challenges and ecological issues that we are facing, preventing contamination of our night sky is proving to be our best attainable approach in bringing communities together for commonly held goals.

Energy saved by turning off, shielding, or reducing wasted light can potentially conserve water used in conventional electricity generation. Community confidence soars as trespassing lights are toned down, revealing Texas' big open skies filled with ancient nighttime vistas of our breathtaking cosmos. We can all become good neighbors with the use of night-sky friendly lighting practices.

Good news is that night-sky and neighbor-friendly lighting is relatively easy to do. And if done right, it's even easier on the wallet than high-wattage and poorly designed light that sprays itself up and out, polluting the skies and trespassing into neighboring windows. As shown time and time again, it's just as safe to use less volume, but more intentional lighting directed toward the ground or limited to specific areas only where it's needed.

Preventing pollution of the night can help us solve our bigger problems in the day!

***About the Author:***

Bill is the founder and president of Native American Seed. Bill also serves as the president of Clear View Alliance in an effort to advocate for the need of extreme care in the placement of high voltage transmission lines being built across the western Hill Country region. Bill has been a member of the HCA board since 2010 and often serves as a voice for the unique challenges happening in the “hinterlands” of the Hill Country.

**Media Contact**

Josh Sendejar – [josh@hillcountryalliance.org](mailto:josh@hillcountryalliance.org) | (512) 710-6949

**Photo Attachments:**



Wonder - Photo Courtesy of Ron Greebon (2017), Hill Country Alliance



Bill Neiman, courtesy of Native American Seed