



TEXAS HILL COUNTRY  
conservation network

# Network Strategic Plan

2024 – 2028

Adopted December 2023



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# Executive Summary

## PROTECTING THE HILL COUNTRY

The Texas Hill Country is at a crossroads. This iconic landscape of complex geology, unique ecology, and captivating natural beauty is facing tremendous threats from sprawling growth and development. Land fragmentation and consumption, coupled with groundwater overuse and rapid expansion of impermeable cover from new buildings, roads, and parking lots, is inhibiting groundwater recharge and increasingly threatening open spaces, spring and stream flows, natural habitat and endemic wildlife, agricultural productivity, and the region’s distinctive character. The window of opportunity to keep the Texas Hill Country natural and scenic will likely close within our generation. Making strides for conservation of the Hill Country will also benefit surrounding communities by increasing resilience to natural disasters and protecting the sacred waters and landscapes that define the Hill Country experience.

### MISSION

To maximize protection of the Hill Country’s natural resources through enhanced collaboration.

In 2017, a group of organizations and agencies came together to form the Texas Hill Country Conservation Network (Network), recognizing that together they can inspire greater action than any one organization, agency, or brand could achieve alone. The Network aims to significantly scale up the impact of conservation-focused organizations working to protect the natural resources and heritage and quality of life in the Texas Hill Country. Over the next few years, this means making substantial progress in protecting open spaces, agricultural and ranch lands, enhancing land stewardship and habitat restoration activities, and ultimately mitigating threats to water quality and quantity in the region.

In addition to increasing impact on the ground, the Network seeks to increase the visibility of existing collaboration among conservation-focused organizations and institutions, and to enable and support these organizations to efficiently and equitably expand their ambition, activities, and collective impact. The Network also provides a clearer platform from which conservation-focused organizations can work together to engage with other stakeholders who are vital to long-term conservation and stewardship in the Hill Country—such as landowners, businesses, farmers and ranchers, local and county officials, city and county leaders in the urban areas at the edges of the Hill Country, state and federal government agencies, outdoor and hunting enthusiasts, tourism industry members, and many other groups.

## NETWORK STRATEGIC PLAN

The objective of this plan is to articulate a strong value proposition to encourage participation in the Network, to improve coordination and alignment of activities and messaging among member organizations and enhance prospects for scaling collective impact.

This second iteration of the Network’s strategic plan includes: identification of the problem the Network seeks to address; our statement of purpose; our mission and vision statements; a description of how members will collaborate; seven priority goal areas for 2023-2027 and metrics to measure progress; an outline of the Network’s design and structure; and a statement of the Network approach and values.

## Priority Goals 2024-2028

Though the Texas Hill Country faces many challenges, significant opportunities also exist to alter the current trajectory of development and sprawl. With the strategic coordination of partners and the leveraged deployment of resources through targeted activities and integrated initiatives, the Network can play a transformational role in preserving the unique characteristics of the Texas Hill Country, ensuring that this extraordinary place will be experienced by all Texans and visitors for generations to come.

**Landscape-Level Impact Goals:** The first four goals focus on achieving tangible impact in the Hill Country landscape – on land conservation and stewardship, on water quantity and quality, and on preserving our view of the night sky. It is vital to keep strategic focus and activities oriented to making progress on tangible outcomes and impacts that progress the Network’s vision. These four goals are designed to help connect and align, where appropriate, members’ individual and collective efforts towards impacts on the ground and in all communities.

- **Goal 1:** Scale permanent land conservation and stewardship practices and shape sustainable development practices
- **Goal 2:** Ensure adequate spring and river flows for human and ecological systems
- **Goal 3:** Protect the water quality in Hill Country creeks, waterways, and aquifers from contamination by wastewater and run-off
- **Goal 4:** Expand Night Sky preservation, education, outreach, and policy

**Process and Systems Goals:** Accelerating progress on landscape-level impact goals over the next 5 years and beyond will also require advancing systemic changes. The first two process goals (Goals #5 and #6) recognize the importance of growing awareness around Hill Country conservation and scaling up investment. The last process and systems goal is special in that it recognizes the need and opportunity to engage with many other partners across the region and outside of the conservation community to forge a shared vision for the Hill Country and to develop creative partnerships and initiatives that broaden and deepen efforts to protect the Hill Country.

- **Goal 5:** Grow awareness and support for Hill Country conservation among the public and multiple levels of government
- **Goal 6:** Scale up investment in Hill Country conservation
- **Goal 7:** Build long-term partnerships for durable conservation of the Texas Hill Country

We will take an adaptive approach within this goal framework to refine and adapt coordinated activities in ways that are responsive to evolving conditions, needs, and opportunities. Network members will craft annual action plans around each of these goals that help to improve clarity and communications around how individual organizations will be working to advance these efforts.

# Why a Network?

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

*The Texas Hill Country is an iconic landscape filled with natural beauty and heritage-rich communities that is at a crossroads, facing tremendous opportunities from its unique assets as well as significant threats from sprawling growth and development.* The Hill Country is under intense development pressure from burgeoning population growth in the region and the surrounding cities.<sup>1</sup> Land fragmentation and consumption from development, coupled with groundwater pumping and rapid expansion of impermeable cover from new buildings, roads, and parking lots that inhibits groundwater recharge, are increasingly threatening open spaces, spring and stream flows, natural habitat and wildlife, agricultural productivity, and communities. The challenges will likely grow significantly over the coming decades given the dramatic population growth projections for the Hill Country and the Austin-San Antonio metro region. As growth increases, the consumptive pressures on land and water resources will continue to spike. The cost of conservation will also escalate. A changing climate and resulting extreme weather events will further threaten the region in diverse ways, including increased frequency and severity of dry years, storms, and flooding. As these challenges continue across the region, diverse solutions will be needed to safeguard our natural resources and the communities that depend on them.

There are numerous land and water conservation organizations working together to protect land, water, and the communities within the Hill Country. While there are many success stories, this collaborative work lacks visibility and scale needed to accomplish meaningful results. In addition, key constituencies who have a big stake in protecting the Texas Hill Country—residents, tourists, communities, scientists, landowners, businesses, farmers and ranchers, rural and urban officials, outdoor and hunting enthusiasts, tourism and outdoor industry members, and many other groups—have not been organized or activated in meaningful ways. Nature thrives on diversity, cooperation, and resilience, and so must our human systems. It is in this context that key conservation organizations and partners came together to form the Texas Hill Country Conservation Network in 2017.

## NETWORK PURPOSE

*The Texas Hill Country Conservation Network (Network) aims to significantly scale up the impact of conservation-focused organizations working to protect the natural resources and unique and complex cultures, and quality of life in the Texas Hill Country.* The Network defines conservation broadly to include not just ecological and natural resource dimensions, but also economic and social dimensions—recognizing the value of people and nature thriving together on the landscape.

In addition to increasing impact on the ground, the Network seeks to increase the visibility of existing collaboration among conservation-focused organizations and institutions, and to enable and support these organizations to efficiently expand and scale their ambition, activities, and collective impact. The Network also provides a clear platform from which conservation-focused organizations can work together to engage with the stakeholders who are vital to long-term conservation and stewardship in the Hill Country. Strong and connected

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<sup>1</sup> The population in the Texas Hill Country was approximately 3.3 million in 2010 and it is expected to grow to between 4 and 6.8 million by 2050. Source: University of Texas at Austin. [Towards a Regional Plan for the Texas Hill Country](#). 2016.

networks—or “networks of networks” of diverse partners—have proven vital to addressing the complexities of large landscape conservation across the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

## NETWORK VISION

*Clear flowing springs. Wide open spaces. Starry night skies. Vistas of rolling hills. Rivers and fields abundant with wildlife. Blooms of bluebonnets and wildflowers. Working farms and ranches. Scenic country drives and hikes. Idyllic getaways. Diverse, close-knit and welcoming communities. Strong and resilient economies functioning harmoniously with the natural environment.*

Our vision is that these unique characteristics of this extraordinary place—the Hill Country in the heart of Texas—will be experienced by Texans and visitors for generations to come.

When viewed from the sky in 2050 or 2100, the Hill Country landscape will still have large swaths of natural and scenic open spaces and working agricultural and ranch lands, dotted with clusters of compact and healthy communities. The Hill Country landscape and communities will be better equipped to weather and bounce back from the impacts of a changing climate, including severe storms, flooding, and drought. This vision includes strong, connected networks of diverse groups and people working together to protect these characteristics—from clear-flowing creeks to thriving local communities and economies.

## NETWORK MISSION

Ultimately, the Texas Hill Country Conservation Network mission is *to maximize the protection of the Hill Country’s natural resources through enhanced collaboration.*

## GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS

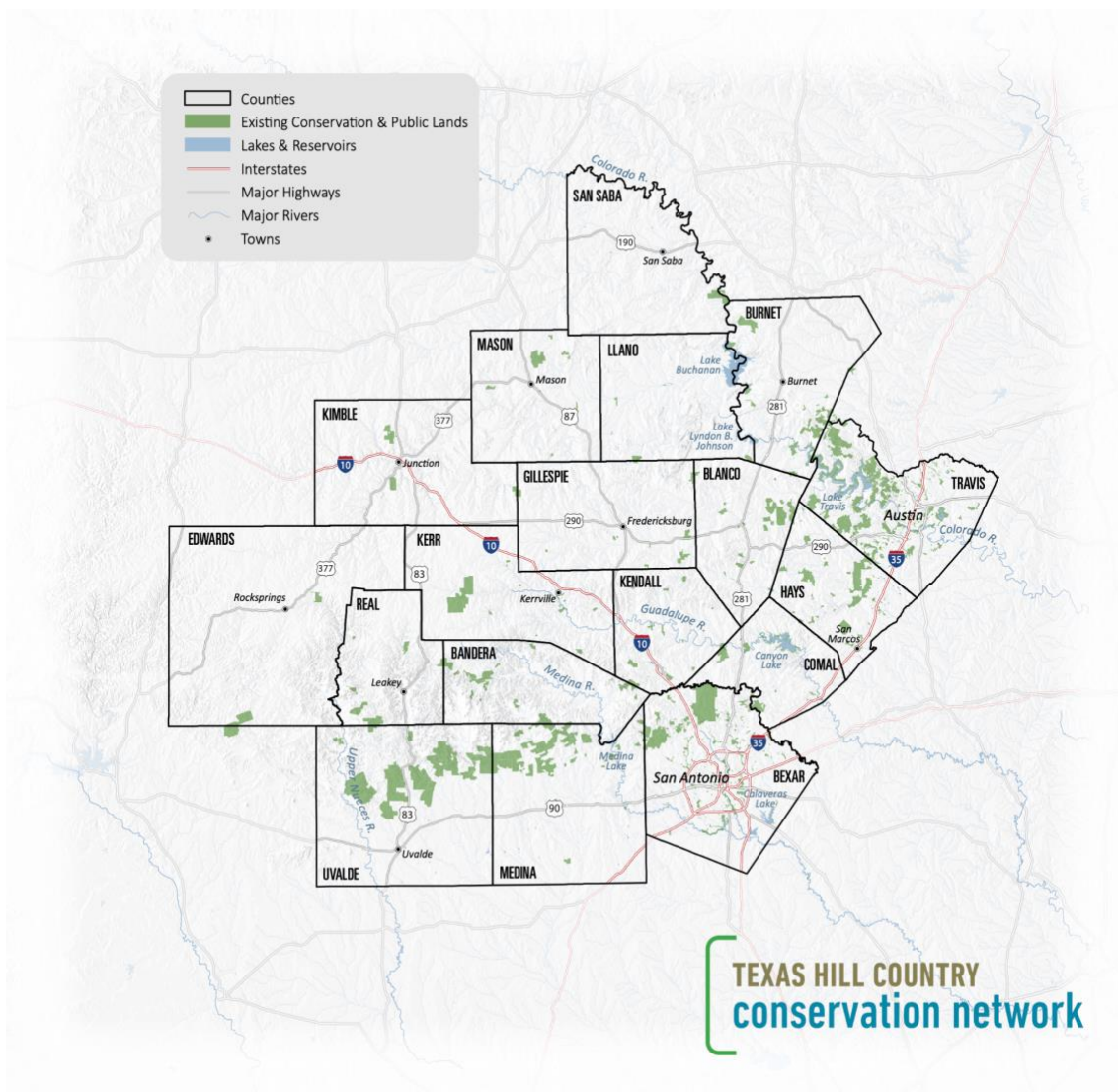
The Network focuses its work on the Texas Hill Country, which includes the region from Austin, south along the I-35 corridor to San Antonio, west past Uvalde and Junction and north to Llano. This area encompasses more than 11 million acres in 18 counties including Bandera, Bexar, Blanco, Burnet, Comal, Edwards, Hays, Gillespie, Kerr, Kendall, Kimble, Llano, Mason, Medina, Real, San Saba, Travis, and Uvalde. An estimated 95 percent of this area is held in private ownership. Natural water catchment boundaries and aquifer recharge areas define the region. The Network recognizes the importance of areas to the west and east that affect and are affected by the water resources and development pressures in the Hill Country. In establishing priorities and collaborative efforts, the Network identifies priority sub-sections of this geography based on partnership opportunities, emergent threats, perceived strategic benefit, underserved and at-risk communities, and overall need.

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<sup>2</sup> See Lynn Scarlett (The Nature Conservancy) and Matthew McKinney (University of Montana). “Connecting people and places: the emerging role of network governance in large landscape conservation,” *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*. 2016; 14(3), pp. 116-125. Also see Texas Hill Country Conservation Network. *Network Models and Lessons from Across the U.S.* October 11, 2017.

## OUR COMMUNITY

As a Network working across an 18-county landscape, we address challenges across a huge variety of scales and audiences. Growth, flooding, future water availability, wildlife habitat, access to recreational areas, sustainability of ranching and farming operations, economic resilience—these are challenges felt from the hyper-local level, on the neighborhood or even block scale—all the way up to the basin-wide and regional breadth. This Network Strategic Plan seeks to address natural resource challenges and opportunities that will benefit **all** residents of the Hill Country. We know we will be most successful by activating and empowering our entire Hill Country community in this work. We work with rural, urban, and suburban communities. The benefits of our work ripple out beyond fence lines and traditional geographic boundaries. We aim to proactively seek relationships with all community voices, offer proportional benefits to all communities, and dismantle systems that perpetuate disadvantages or harms to distinct populations. As a coalition of organizations aimed at including representation for all Hill Country voices, we commit to approaching this work with humility and understanding the need to adapt and change as we continue to learn and grow, both as a Network and as individuals.



# How We Work Together

## HARNESSING DIVERSE CAPABILITIES AND CAPACITIES

The Network is a focused initiative to support existing organizations to work together in more visible and impactful ways. The Network recognizes that diverse activities, skills, and competencies—beyond the capabilities and capacities of any single organization—are needed to make progress on the complex issues that must be addressed to achieve the vision outlined above. These include:

- **Listening and Learning.** Intentionally seeking relationships with the full diversity of the Hill Country region, by actively learning from communities through listening to their values, opportunities, threats, and aspirations. Ongoing review and revision of Network strategies to incorporate what we are learning. Our Hill Country Network is an ecosystem and communication is a key component of a highly functioning ecosystem.
- **Research and monitoring.** Conducting and disseminating research on diverse topics relevant to understanding natural, social, and economic systems in the Hill Country as well as research on the efficacy of practices and solutions relevant to Hill Country conservation. Monitoring the state of the natural, social, and economic systems in the Hill Country, as well as changes in the stressors and progress relevant to these systems.
- **Engagement and education.** *Engaging with diverse audiences to communicate the challenges the Hill Country is facing and the value of the Network and its partners to address those challenges through collaborative action.*
- **Direct conservation and restoration actions.** Implementing restoration and permanent conservation projects in rivers, lands, and communities to protect water resources, enhance habitat, prevent devastating flooding, and achieve other environmental, social, and economic conservation benefits. Securing permanent protection of priority lands through conservation easements and other mechanisms.
- **Technical assistance.** Providing expert advice, training, assistance, and incentives relevant to conservation to diverse constituencies (examples: land stewards, local government officials, real estate developers).
- **Organizing, coordination, and convening.** Providing pathways for diverse people and groups who live in or care about the Texas Hill Country to become engaged in conservation efforts. Facilitating conversations to build shared understanding and explore opportunities for collaboration.
- **Advocacy.** Working to encourage decisions, policies, and rules that support conservation in the Hill Country, and working to prevent policies or projects that pose significant threats to conservation of the special environmental, social, and economic characteristics of the Texas Hill Country.
- **Fundraising.** Seeking to raise additional resources to support staff capacity to enhance collaboration, raise funds for network-identified projects, and to support other needs identified by the Steering Committee; seeking resources to support projects identified and developed by the Network or a subset of Network partners; elevating the profile of conservation in Central Texas with non-traditional funders



on a statewide and national reach, strategically presenting the strongest collaborative projects for national funding opportunities, or encouraging collaborative work to grow overall investments flowing to the field of organizations working on activities and initiatives relevant to Hill Country conservation.

Not all organizations participating in the Network conduct all these activities—in fact, most focus on just a few. However, Network members appreciate the value each of these (and other) activities hold. Experience from other conservation networks across the U.S. indicates that these functions, capabilities, and capacities are most effective when they are linked and aligned to focus on specific goals and outcomes. The Network aims to help support this linking and aligning to enhance ambition, activities, and collective impact.

## HOW WE ARE STRUCTURED

The Network is composed of a variety of organizations focused on or interested in conservation within the region. Formal membership requires a signed [Texas Hill Country Conservation Network Resolution](#) affirming their organization’s commitment to collaborating and conserving the Texas Hill Country. To date, over 3 dozen organizations have become formal members. The full membership of the Network meets twice a year, with additional meetings occurring more frequently.

The Network is governed by a Steering Committee made up of six to twelve members. The Steering Committee elects an Executive Committee made up of two Co-Chairs as well as two additional Steering Committee members. Both the Executive and Steering Committees meet regularly to guide Network activities and provide updates on Network projects and business related to the sub-committees. The Network has formalized five committees: Climate Change; Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEIJ); Land; Night Skies; and Water. These committees serve as specialized chambers which provide space to coordinate and develop potential actions for the Network to consider in order to advance its goals.

The Hill Country Alliance serves as the fiscal sponsor for the Network, providing a structure for funding Network projects, as well as administrative support in the form of the Network Manager. The Texas Hill Country Conservation Network Manager coordinates the efforts of the Network and provides administrative support for the Network’s projects.

## HOW WE ARE ACCOUNTABLE

Network members will take an adaptive approach within this framework to refine and adapt coordinated activities in ways that are responsive to evolving conditions, needs, and opportunities.

The Network will craft annual action plans around each of these goals that help to improve clarity and communications around how individual organizations will be working to advance these efforts and identify opportunities for collaborative activities and projects and enhanced coordination.

Network committees will develop 2-year action plans for each goal to outline how Network organizations aim to work individually and together to advance progress toward the goal(s).

Network plans and public-facing documents will be developed with the input of and considered for endorsement from the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice Committee.

The Network will produce an updated State of the Hill Country Report every five years.

## WHAT WE ARE WORKING TO ACCOMPLISH

# Network Priority Goals for 2024-2028

Organizations participating in the Network commit to working together on the priority goals outlined below. The coming decade is a vital window of opportunity to make significant advances in all of these areas, and significant progress is needed over the next five years. Most of these goals are connected and mutually-reinforcing. However, they delineate key focal areas for network activities. The seven priority goals can be considered in two categories:

- **Landscape Impact Goals (Goals 1-4):** We will focus on achieving tangible impacts on land conservation and stewardship, water quantity and quality, and quality of life for everyone in the region.
- **Process and Systems Goals (Goals 5-7):** We will grow awareness around the need for conservation and scaling investment. We will engage with diverse partners to forge a shared vision for the region and to develop creative partnerships and initiatives that broaden and deepen efforts to protect land and water resources for generations to come.

# LANDSCAPE IMPACT GOALS

## GOAL 1: SCALE PERMANENT LAND CONSERVATION AND STEWARDSHIP PRACTICES AND SHAPE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES

### *2028 Targets:*

**Land Conservation:** Increase amount of conserved land by 150,000 acres (from 550,000 acres reported in the 2021 State of the Hill Country Report) and support the creation of five new publicly accessible parks or conserved areas.

**Land Stewardship:** Implement and finance 5 million dollars in land stewardship incentives through partner led initiatives such as the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP).

**Sound Development:** Define criteria for "Low Impact Developments" for the Hill Country. Actively advance the implementation of five model Low Impact Development projects in the Hill Country.

We must significantly increase the pace and amount of permanent land protection to:

- Prevent unplanned suburban sprawl and the excessive consumption of working lands and wildlife habitat;
- Minimize the expansion of impermeable surface cover that prevents recharge of aquifers and reduces spring flow;
- Slow and filter storm water run-off to prevent flooding and deterioration of water quality;
- Preserve the ecological function and scenic beauty of natural areas, which are vital assets to public health, quality of life, and the regional economy.

The Hill Country faces a perfect storm of pressures on the land—high rates of land fragmentation, increasing land sale values, and a rapidly growing regional population. Substantial land conservation progress is needed over the next 5-10 years before development pressures overwhelm the affordability and prevalence of conservation opportunities.

The Network recognizes that some lands should have higher priority for conservation than others regarding the multiple benefits that can accrue from their conservation. We will prioritize land conservation in areas that have high value for: 1) Water Supply; 2) Water Quality; 3) Climate Resilience; 4) Wildlife Habitat and Connectivity; 5) Working Lands; 6) Access to Outdoors & Nature.

Conservation efforts to date in Texas and the Hill Country have acknowledged and demonstrated the importance of advancing market-oriented solutions that permanently protect private lands from development—such as conservation easements. Innovative approaches to development (such as low impact development and urban planning) will be critical for limiting the impact of other land uses. Additionally, having public park lands is

vital to community needs and provides important opportunities for access to natural and outdoor recreational activities. We aim to expand efforts to engage both willing private landowners and Hill Country communities to increase private and public land conservation and stewardship, while mitigating the impacts of development.

Real progress in preserving natural systems—which support healthy fish, wildlife, and plants—will also require substantial scaling of stewardship practices on private lands, particularly in aquifer recharge areas and on lands bordering creeks, rivers, and springs. Land stewardship is important for protecting water quality and for supporting aquifer recharge, as well as for preventing the spread of invasive species that impact the viability of native plants and wildlife. Stewardship can be supported through education and outreach, technical assistance, and making financial incentives available to defray stewardship costs.

Network member organizations will:

- Implement the Natural Infrastructure Plan, which provides needed data on the importance of natural areas and working lands for the viability of the region as well as tools for implementation and funding of conservation efforts.
- Integrate the State of the Hill Country Report into stakeholder outreach to highlight threats to sensitive natural resources and conservation efforts to date.
- Regularly convene land trusts and other conservation practitioners and advocates working in the Hill Country to share information and identify and advance coordination and collaboration opportunities.
- Continue and expand collaborative landowner outreach activities on conservation easements and other approaches to keeping land intact and ecologically viable.
- Incorporate the input of diverse groups in future strategic planning and related implementation efforts, including those representing indigenous peoples and people of color.

### ***Measuring Progress: Land Conservation***

Potential metrics for tracking progress on Goal 1 Targets include:

Number of conserved and developed land acres

(State of the Hill Country Report – Metric 2 and 3)

Percentage of total Hill Country acreage that is conserved and developed

(State of the Hill Country Report – Metric 2 and 3)

Amount of funding distributed for land stewardship through the Camp Bullis Sentinel Landscape RCPP, Northern Hill Country RCPP, and other land stewardship incentive programs

Number of model low impact development projects in the Hill Country

*Potential data sources or platforms:* The Texas Land Trust Council (TLTC) maintains a Conservation Lands Inventory for the state of Texas (see <http://www.texaslandtrustcouncil.org/index.php/what-we-do/cli>). Hill Country Alliance maps may also be useful for highlighting land conservation data for Hill Country counties (see <http://www.hillcountryalliance.org/maps/>). THCCN State of the Hill Country Report.

## GOAL 2: ENSURE ADEQUATE SPRING AND RIVER FLOWS FOR HUMAN AND ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

### *2028 Targets:*

**Groundwater Conservation: Advocate for sound groundwater policy and advance public awareness to maintain the 2000-2020 median spring flows of the four major springs in the Hill Country.**

**Water Consumption: Reduce Average GPCD to 155 across the Hill Country (10% reduction from the 2018 average of 172 GPCD)**

Ensuring freshwater flows in Hill Country springs and rivers is key to preserving the natural systems and the economy of the region and beyond, as the Hill Country rivers flow down to the Texas coast, estuaries, and fisheries. Surface water and groundwater are inextricably connected in the Hill Country due to the unique features of our karst aquifers, meaning that freshwater stewardship needs to focus on reducing demand for groundwater and surface water resources, and on ensuring adequate protection of aquifer recharge capacities. Progress in these areas will be important to hedge against natural fluctuations in rainfall, periodic drought conditions, and impacts from climate change.

Network member organizations will:

- Conduct research and analysis to improve understanding of groundwater and surface water interactions in the Hill Country, as well as the efficacy and benefits of various practices for water availability (including land conservation and stewardship). Share information on the full costs of water development options and proposed projects, to support more informed decisions by communities.
- Work to develop and support strong watershed councils that effectively support monitoring and stewardship in major river and creek corridors in the Hill Country.
- Support and implement outreach, education, and assistance programs to accelerate implementation of residential, municipal, and commercial rainwater capture and use systems across the Hill Country.
- Encourage and support development of model low-impact development projects that demonstrate the feasibility and benefits of net-zero water and energy approaches and technologies.
- Work in partnership with interested Hill Country communities to help them manage growth and development pressures that have potential to substantially undermine water availability or aquifer recharge capabilities in their watersheds. Support development and use of thoughtful standards and models (e.g., model subdivision agreements) that advance low-impact development.
- Monitor and analyze, and organize and advocate around, water development and infrastructure projects and policies that have potential to adversely impact spring and river flows in the Hill Country.
- Promote policies and practices that reduce the use of high water use landscaping and automated sprinkler systems. Encourage reduction of turf grass and the adoption of native plants in landscaping.

- Enhance the authority of Groundwater Conservation Districts to ensure sustainable management of groundwater throughout the Hill Country. Promote creation of a Trinity Aquifer Authority and Groundwater Management Zones where applicable.
- Participate in the Regional Flood Planning process and promote nature-based solutions that both mitigate flooding, protect natural infrastructure, and promote aquifer recharge.
- Encourage landowners to adopt land stewardship practices that protect natural infrastructure, slow stormwater flows and enhance groundwater recharge.

### ***Measuring Progress: Ensuring Spring and River Flows***

Average GPCD of Hill Country Water Systems

Springflow of the four major springs within the Hill Country

*Data sources:* The Texas Water Development Board tracks GPCD data for different water user groups, which would be helpful in tracking water consumption of Hill Country water systems (see <http://www.twdb.gov/waterplanning/data/dashboard/index.asp>). The U.S. Geologic Survey maintains springflow data, which can be used to monitor base flow ([https://txpub.usgs.gov/projects/spring\\_calc/](https://txpub.usgs.gov/projects/spring_calc/)).

## GOAL 3: PROTECT THE WATER QUALITY IN HILL COUNTRY CREEKS, WATERWAYS, AND AQUIFERS FROM CONTAMINATION BY WASTEWATER AND RUN-OFF

### *2028 Targets:*

**Maintain or increase the number of pristine stream miles in the Hill Country.**

**Reduce the number of Hill Country streams on the Impaired Streams list to less than 22 (number of impaired segments as of 2020).**

As development in the Hill Country increases, pressures on water quality in rivers, creeks, and lakes also grow. Communities are faced with tough choices about how to best manage wastewater. For example, while it may seem most cost effective to discharge treated sewage treatment plant effluent into nearby rivers or creeks, these discharges can profoundly alter the pristine water quality in these surface waters and may be better addressed through alternatives such as permitted land application. Leaking septic and wastewater systems can also adversely impact water quality. Impacts to water quality can change water chemistry in ways that affect fish and wildlife health, algae blooms, and human health through drinking water and recreational uses such as swimming. More work is needed to research, compile, and communicate credible information on the scientific, health, environmental, and economic dimensions of various options for managing wastewater. Work is also needed to engage with Hill Country communities and other partners to discuss and advance workable and effective plans for addressing wastewater management challenges.

Creek and river water quality is also affected by stormwater run-off which carries contaminants and nutrients into surface waters. Riparian buffers with native vegetation and natural debris can help filter contaminants before they enter surface waters and provide habitat for wildlife. By slowing down cresting waters, these riparian buffers can also help reduce devastating flooding, such as the 2013 Halloween and 2015 Memorial Day floods, which devastated communities in Hays and Travis Counties.

Network member organizations will:

- Raise awareness across the Hill Country about the current state of water quality in creeks and rivers.
- Develop resources that make the economic and environmental case for alternatives to municipal direct discharge of sewage effluent to Hill Country rivers and creeks.
- Work with Hill Country communities to support their efforts to protect surface water quality, including by providing technical assistance and advocacy on alternatives to direct discharge and on measures to reduce contamination associated with stormwater run-off (e.g., development of model subdivision agreements, standards and practices for transportation infrastructure development, and other needs).
- Conduct outreach, education, assistance, and/or direct support to city and county officials and landowners regarding riparian restoration benefits and opportunities.
- Support efforts to expand the use of rainwater capture systems that slow run-off and reduce groundwater and municipal water use.

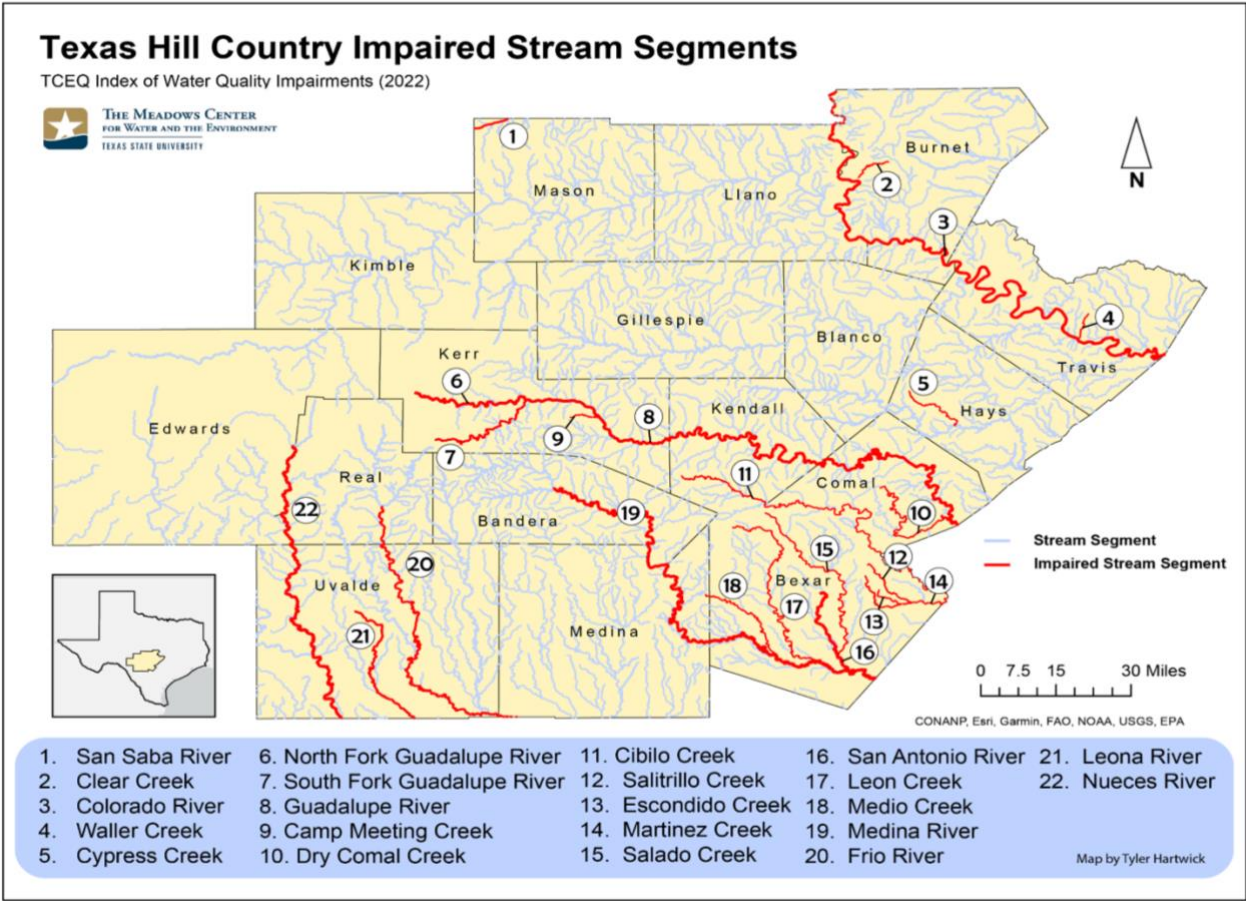
- Support efforts that minimize increases in impermeable cover, particularly near surface waters, to reduce severe flooding hazards and to prevent contaminants from running into rivers and creeks.
- Encourage and support creation of rain gardens and other natural landscape features that capture storm waters and allow for aquifer recharge and natural filtration.
- Promote road construction practices that reduce pollution and facilitate groundwater recharge (roads and drainage on contour, reduced use of concrete for stormwater management).

**Measuring Progress: Protecting Water Quality**

Potential metrics for tracking progress on Goal 3 Targets include:

Number of Pristine Stream segments in the Hill Country

Data sources: The Texas Council on Environmental Quality’s Surface Water Quality Viewer can be used to monitor the number of impaired segments in the Hill Country (<http://tceq.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=b0ab6bac411a49189106064b70bbe778>)





## GOAL 4: EXPAND NIGHT SKY PRESERVATION, EDUCATION, OUTREACH, AND POLICY

### *2028 Targets:*

**Protecting Night Skies: Maintain or increase the acreage of "excellent" night sky quality (62%) while reducing the acreage of "poor" night sky visibility (14%), as compared to the 2015 baseline assessment published in the State of the Hill Country report.**

**Increasing DarkSky Places: Double the number of DarkSky Places designated by DarkSky International in our region, bringing the total to 24.**

**Establishing a DarkSky Reserve**

When viewed from space, the Eastern United States' night sky is a vast territory of brightly lit cities and sprawl, and the Western United States is an expanse of darkness punctuated by bright spots. The dividing line between light and dark, all the way from the Rio Grande to the Canadian border, is I-35. For this reason, we say the Hill Country, home to the first dark skies one finds when driving from the metropolises of Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, or Austin, towards the wide-open skies of West Texas, is "on the edge of night."

As our region grows, we are losing our precious star-filled skies—but we don't have to. Growth and development can occur with minimal, if any, impact on our dark night skies. It's all about shielding outdoor lighting to shine on the ground, not up into our skies or adjacent properties and about putting lights on switches and motion sensors, so they shine only when someone is around to make use of the light. Night-sky-friendly lighting costs the same as, if not less than, unfriendly lighting and it improves the quality of life and tourism appeal, saves on energy costs, and protects habitat quality for wildlife. Moreover, we can quickly reverse the light pollution we suffer today with simple lighting retrofit projects, more thoughtful local policies, and some basic neighbor-to-neighbor education.

For many people, the night sky is a gateway into a lasting connection with and love of nature. It is where many people first find the wonder that is inside all of us and reflected in the natural world all around us. When we lose a view of the stars, we lose a future community of nature-loving people, too. And, preserving and restoring darkness at night is an imperative part of habitat conservation – ecosystems and flora and fauna within them have evolved to respond to cycles of light, and many depend directly on dark nights and star-filled skies for their hunting, hiding, navigation, mating, and biorhythms. Of particular note, migratory birds rely upon starry night skies to navigate during migration.

As a component of the conservation and stewardship puzzle, night skies are often an appealing entry point for communities that may not yet be interested in what they see as costly land conservation, untested water infrastructure innovations, or divisive energy and climate issues. Night skies stewardship is a win-win, low- or no-cost, intuitive, relatable pursuit that can result not only in darker skies, but also connecting communities in wonder of our natural world.

DarkSky Place designations from DarkSky International are invaluable. They give a tangible goal to strive for and, once achieved, institutionalize a community's commitment to dark skies. They mark a destination on the map for anyone looking to see Texas' iconic skies. Our region currently boasts five DarkSky Parks, six DarkSky Communities, and two DarkSky Developments of Distinction. Thanks to the work of several Network partners and others in our region, the DarkSky International stated in 2017 that "there are more community efforts to preserve the night sky in the Hill Country than there are in any other similarly sized region on earth."

Our work must meet communities where they are, and not be perceived as imposing "international" designations on people who do not want them. In that vein, pursuing a Hill Country DarkSky Reserve has the most chance of success if supported by a grassroots non-profit led by trusted community leaders from each of the communities in its geography.

Network member organizations will:

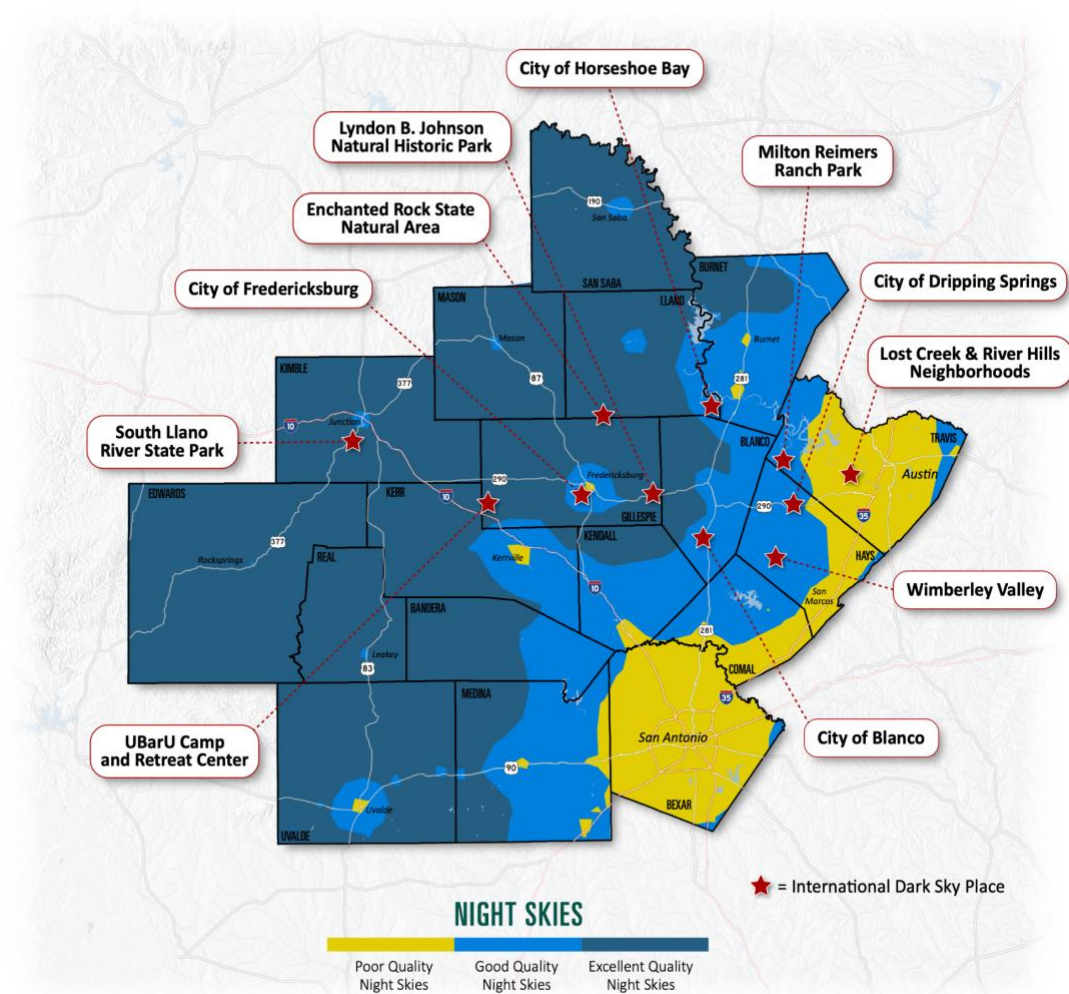
- Implement the Network's Land, Water, Sky and Natural Infrastructure Plan, which shows areas at most significant risk of increased light pollution and parts of the region where night sky preservation efforts are strongest.
- Publicize and integrate the State of the Hill Country Report into stakeholder outreach, which details the baseline of night sky quality and designates DarkSky Places to date.
- Regularly convene Night Sky Friends groups and the Night Sky Team working in the Hill Country to share information and identify and advance coordination and collaboration opportunities.
- Expand collaborative community outreach activities, developing related resources on best practices, night-sky-friendly programs, municipal policy, conservation easements, and other approaches to improving night sky preservation efforts locally and regionally.
- Develop and maintain a wide-reaching standard for sky quality reporting, accessible for public use and yielding quantifiable data for tracking improvement related to night sky preservation efforts.
- Incorporate the input of diverse groups in future strategic planning and related implementation efforts, including those representing Indigenous peoples and people of color.
- Incorporate night sky-friendly practices in the land and water endeavors of the Network. For example, new One Water facilities should feature night sky-friendly-lighting and conservation easements should include dark sky provisions. Community surveys should consist of questions about stargazing as an outdoor activity, and local and regional plans should recognize the stars at night, big and bright, as an iconic feature of our region and a draw to tourists, businesses, and residents.

## Measuring Progress: Expanding Night Sky Preservation

Potential metrics for tracking progress on Goal 4 Targets include:

- Number of DarkSky International designated DarkSky Places
- Number of night sky-friendly outdoor lighting ordinances adopted
- Improvement in sky quality based on ground-based meter readings and satellite telemetry
- Number of Friends of the Night Sky groups formed

Data sources: DarkSky International DarkSky Places Program, DarkSky Texas



# PROCESS AND SYSTEMS GOALS

## GOAL 5: GROW AWARENESS AND SUPPORT FOR HILL COUNTRY CONSERVATION AMONG THE PUBLIC AND MULTIPLE LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT

### *2028 Targets:*

**Measure Our Reach:** Create clear metrics, tools, and approaches to measure the diversity of our audiences engaged and contributing to / benefiting from Network efforts.

**Strengthen Communications Tools:** Create and deploy clear tools (including website, email templates, branding guidelines, etc) to communicate internally and externally

**Scale Awareness:** Launch a coordinated campaign to raise public awareness of and support for the protection of Hill Country natural resources.

Public understanding of and support for conservation is vital to scaling conservation activity in the region and key to accelerating the adoption of land stewardship practices, as well as support for local and state policies and investments (e.g., bond issues) that support conservation. Making clear connections to the economic health of communities in the Hill Country will be important to securing support, as will the development and dissemination of simple and aligned messages and narratives, delivered from trusted messengers and repeated often. The Network can accomplish these goals by utilizing shared projects, messaging documents, metrics, and facts to clearly lay out the challenges facing the Hill Country, as well as some of the solutions.

Organizations participating in the Network will:

- Work together on shared research, mapping, strategizing and metrics projects that clearly identify challenges facing the region, and prioritize solutions.
- Develop clearer and more aligned messages and narratives to use in their communications activities.
- Conduct polling, identify target audiences, and create coordinated campaign messages to dramatically scale conservation within the Hill Country in ways that align with the interests of diverse communities across the region.
- Support the development and distribution of the State of the Hill Country report and stories highlighting collaborative action on Hill Country issues (every 2-3 years).
- Cultivate creative partnerships to enhance public awareness, including with the media.
- Work to advance the Network Values and Principles.

## **Measuring Progress: Grow Awareness and Support for Hill Country Conservation**

Metrics for tracking progress on goal 5 include:

All outreach materials are produced in English and Spanish.

Number of press releases, media mentions, and stories covering Network issues.

Maintenance of a standalone website, tracking website engagement.

Number of Network talking points and issue briefs on issues of importance distributed to Network member organizations for action.

## GOAL 6: SCALE UP INVESTMENT IN HILL COUNTRY CONSERVATION

### *2028 Targets:*

**Secure the passage of 6 bond measures for public investment in land conservation.**

**Create a vision and clear strategy to launch a Hill Country conservation strike fund.**

**Leverage or expand Five new federal funding streams for scaled conservation.**

More resources are needed to achieve these conservation goals in the Hill Country. As a state that is overwhelmingly privately owned, market-based approaches must be pursued to enable funding sources for permanent land protection. Even donated conservation easements require funding to mitigate transaction costs and to fund perpetual land trust monitoring and other stewardship activities. In addition, many land stewards and communities lack sufficient resources to implement conservation measures or programs. Smart philanthropic, public, and private investments can offset these costs and catalyze co-investment and leverage other resources.

This process-focused goal has two important dimensions: (1) the need to dramatically scale public, private, and philanthropic investment flowing to land, water, and night skies conservation in the region (e.g., local bond initiatives, state and federal funding, and/or development of programs where investment is coupled with economic and population growth such as source water protection programs and tax increment financing); (2) resources available to increase the capacity of conservation organizations working in the Hill Country.

Network member organizations will:

- Commence and support efforts to conduct county and municipal bond measures to invest in open space preservation and land conservation and stewardship.
- Support the growth of local investments from key conservation funding sources such as the Texas Farm and Ranch Lands Conservation Program, the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, the Regional Conservation partnership Program, and Restoring America’s Wildlife Act.
- Identify and facilitate funding from innovative sources of funding such as source water protection, tax increment financing and hazard mitigation funds.
- Encourage the development of a foundation and philanthropist working group or “table” to cultivate efforts to grow philanthropic investment in Hill Country conservation.
- Engage Texas foundations in helping to attract philanthropic investment from other funders, including those working nationally.
- Explore options for developing investments that match the urgent demand for conservation funds, attracting and managing significantly scaled resources to support Hill Country communities and conservation, capitalized by public and private funding sources.

- Pursue and advance collaborative grant opportunities, including those through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program and Camp Bullis Sentinel Landscape, to secure resources from federal agencies and other entities to support Hill Country conservation and Network-proposed collaborative projects.
- Pursue other creative approaches for scaling investment in Hill Country conservation.

### ***Measuring Progress: Investment in Hill Country Conservation***

Potential metrics for tracking progress on Goal 5 include:

Number of ballot measures for public investment in land conservation passed (from State of the Hill Country Report – metric 8).

Total of conservation funds passed (from State of the Hill Country Report – metric 8).

Track economic growth rates of conservation funds (from State of the Hill Country Report – metric 8).

Breakdown of funds by county (from State of the Hill Country Report – metric 8).

*Potential data sources or platforms:* State of the Hill Country Report – Metric 8 Work to identify major conservation investment sources and maintain spreadsheets to track annual resource flows. THCCN could opt to share basic data on the number and amount of individual donations/members, although some data

## GOAL 7: BUILD LONG-TERM PARTNERSHIPS FOR DURABLE CONSERVATION OF THE TEXAS HILL COUNTRY

### *2028 Targets:*

**Grow the Network: Expand the list of formal Network Partners to 50 actively contributing groups & organizations**

**Strengthen Network Governance: The Steering Committee and Network Working Groups have a strong and stable structure and leadership, guided by a clear strategy, with calls to action for diverse constituencies to engage with**

**Transparency in Project Selection: Create a clear guidance and process for choosing projects and pursuing funding for the Network**

**Deepen Partnerships and Impact: Engage new partners in the work of the Network and identify and implement strategies to expand the reach of Network efforts into the organizations that are a part of the work**

Conservation-focused organizations (even Network organizations) cannot achieve the necessary scope of impact on their own. Long-term success will require strong and durable partnerships that engage diverse stakeholders in common cause. The Network can provide an effective platform for (1) collaborating with interested stakeholders and partners, and (2) coordinating efforts (both visible and behind the scenes) to activate key stakeholder groups and to engage with them in advancing progress on issues relevant to Hill Country conservation.

To achieve this, the Network will need to continue strengthening its internal governance by developing policies and procedures and providing additional opportunities for partners to connect with the work of the Network. Through further solidification of the Network's structure, we can engage additional partners in our work, while ensuring the transparency that is foundational to an inclusive and equitable collaboration.

The Network also recognizes the importance of working directly with Hill Country communities to support their own efforts to plan their futures—addressing social, economic, and environmental dimensions—in ways that both capture opportunities and address pressures and challenges. The Network will work to actively encourage community-centered planning efforts and seek to support these efforts—in collaboration with partners—by providing guidance, technical assistance, and examples and models for consideration.



***Measuring Progress: Build Long-Term Partnerships for Durable Conservation of the Texas Hill Country***

Metrics for tracking progress on Goal 7 include:

Number of actively contributing partners

Strong and stable Steering Committee and Working Group leadership

Creation of Network Guidance on selecting and seeking projects and funding opportunities.

*Data sources:* Partner Roster, Working Group leadership and participation.

# Attachment 1: Annual Action Plan Template



**\*EXAMPLE\***

[Land Team]

## 2024-2025 ACTION PLAN

### 2024-2028 STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS 1 & 6:

**Goal #:** \*goal text\* by achieving actions described in the 2028 \*goal targets\*

*(Example Goal 1: Scale permanent land conservation and stewardship practices and shape sustainable development practices by 1) increasing the amount of conserved land; 2) land stewardship incentives through partner led initiatives such as the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP); and 3) defining criteria for “Low Impact Developments” for the Hill Country and implementing five model Low Impact Development projects in the Hill Country by 2028.)*

### 2024-2025 ACTION PLAN INCREMENTAL TARGETS (derived from Strategic Plan targets):

**1) [Insert an increment of Target 1 from Strategic Plan Goal] X acres of the targeted 150,000 acres conserved land**

- a. Designated Lead(s) accountable for outcome:** [Describe organizations participating in the Network and the roles and functions they are playing related to this goal area.]
- b. Key participants and roles:** [Insert bullets summarizing key Network organizations who are or anticipate working on efforts related to this goal area, and the roles that they plan to play on this issue in the coming 1-2 years.]
- c. Coordination plan:** [Describe activities planned to support coordination around this goal (e.g., coordination group, frequency of meetings, other coordination approaches, role of DEIJ Committee, etc.)]
- d. Key deadlines/accomplishment timelines:** [Establish hard deadlines for accountability to ensure progress and achievement of targets by end of 2025]

**2) [Insert an increment of Target 2 from Strategic Plan Goal] X accomplished through the RCPP**

- a. Designated Lead(s) accountable for outcome:** [Describe organizations participating in the Network and the roles and functions they are playing related to this goal area.]
- b. Key participants and roles:** [Insert bullets summarizing key Network organizations who are or anticipate working on efforts related to this goal area, and the roles that they plan to play on this issue in the coming 1-2 years.]
- c. Coordination plan:** [Describe activities planned to support coordination around this goal (e.g., coordination group, frequency of meetings, other coordination approaches, role of DEIJ Committee, etc.)]
- d. Key deadlines/accomplishment timelines:** [Establish hard deadlines for accountability to ensure progress and achievement of targets by end of 2025.]

**3) [Insert an increment of Target 3 from Strategic Plan Goal] The Network hosts a website with a Steering Committee-approved definition of “Low Impact Development” and at least one model project is underway.**

- a. Designated Lead(s) accountable for outcome:** [Describe organizations participating in the Network and the roles and functions they are playing related to this goal area.]
- b. Key participants and roles:** [Insert bullets summarizing key Network organizations who are or anticipate working on efforts related to this goal area, and the roles that they plan to play on this issue in the coming 1-2 years.]
- c. Coordination plan:** [Describe activities planned to support coordination around this goal (e.g., coordination group, frequency of meetings, other coordination approaches, role of DEIJ Committee, etc.)]
- d. Key deadlines/accomplishment timelines:** [Establish hard deadlines for accountability to ensure progress and achievement of targets by end of 2025.]

**4) [Each Team should include a target related to engagement and DEIJ, as applicable to Team objectives] X communities engaged to identify priorities for 1-3**

[How will you include diverse voices, add communities... in your implementation of 1-3 and other functions of your team?]

# Attachment 2: Accomplishments, Strategic Plan 2018-2022

The Texas Hill Country Conservation Network began in 2016. Since that time, the Network has grown into a collaborative force for conservation in the Hill Country. Comprised of non-profit organizations, academic institutions, state agencies, and more; the creation of the Network enables successes led through the efforts of its partner organizations and provides a unified platform to take on major projects and catalyze a greater impact than any one organization could on its own.

Within the last six years the Network has developed an organizational structure, with working groups focused on specific issues (Climate Change, DEI, Land, and Water), and a strategic plan to guide the Network's activities and continued progress. Today, the Network includes 36 formal Network partners, an independent website showcasing the Network and its work, and its own logo and branding. In addition, the Network has continued to focus on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice across its work by formalizing a working group on the topic as well as incorporating DEI into every facet of its work through the use of liaisons to each committee and project.

The Network recognized the need for additional funding resources to tackle the work necessary to conserve the Hill Country. The unified brand and messaging provided a pathway to pursue joint funding opportunities to meet this need. One example of this collective fundraising includes \$5.2 million from the Natural Resources Conservation Service in the Hill Country Headwaters Conservation Initiative. In addition, Network Partners were integral in the passage of a \$70 million Hays County bond and \$20 million Kendall County bond that provide open space protections in the region. The Network also received funds from the Water Funder Initiative, through which \$2.5 million dollars in new or increased private and philanthropic funds. These funds helped to secure over \$100 million in public investment in conservation-focused projects and initiatives.

The State of the Hill Country report was released in 2022, creating a baseline through which the Network can tell the story of conservation success in the Hill Country, inspire conservation action, and measure conservation impact within the region. The Hill Country Land, Water, Sky, and Natural Infrastructure Plan, released in 2023, builds upon the State of the Hill Country report by creating a shared vision for and providing a critical pathway to conserving key aspects of the Hill Country's natural beauty and community culture. In addition to these key resources, the Network has also produced the Water + Equity in the Texas Hill Country report in collaboration with the Texas A&M Natural Resources Institute, which took a deep dive into water and equity concerns in the region.

As the Network continues to advance conservation within the Hill Country, several Hill Country issues continue to take center stage. With increasing developmental pressure as the Hill Country population grows and additional strains on our natural resources are experienced to support that growth, the Network will continue to provide innovative solutions to save what we love about this iconic region of Texas.

# Attachment 3: Network Approach and Values

## THE NETWORK APPROACH

The Network specifically aims to support conservation-focused organizations—and interested partners—to scale their ambition, activities, and collective impact through the following types of approaches:

- **Tell the story** of our unique and imperiled Texas Hill Country and the organizations and people that have worked together in conservation.
- **Improve the extent and effectiveness of coordination and collaboration** among organizations and institutions working to protect and preserve natural resources—land, water, habitat, wildlife—and communities and economies across the region.
- **Enable organizations to align messages, plans, and initiatives**, where possible, to enhance impact.
- **Reduce redundancies** across organizations and initiatives in ways that enable limited resources to be deployed more effectively, improve efficiencies, and avoid confusion.
- **Increase capacity and direct it where it can have the greatest impact** by understanding and aligning talents across the full field of organizations working to advance conservation issues.
- **Enable urban and rural, cities, counties, and state, local and regional government institutions and their partners to work together** on land, water, and night skies conservation and management issues by providing informal forums and mechanisms for information sharing, coordination, and collaboration.
- **Equip organizations to make larger and more compelling asks** for philanthropic and government investments in the region to scale conservation activities.
- **Provide a strong network platform of conservation-focused organizations that makes it easier to activate and work with—in both formal and informal ways—other stakeholders** such as land stewards, businesses, farmers and ranchers, rural, urban, local, and county officials, community leaders, outdoor and hunting enthusiasts, tourism industry members, state and federal agencies, residents, and many other groups and potential partners.
- **Commit to accountability in Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice** with oversight from a DEIJ Committee and the implementation of a DEIJ Liaison process to ensure DEIJ principles are utilized and upheld throughout Network projects and initiatives and at all convenings.

## SHARED VALUES

Individuals and organizations who participate in the Network commit to the following shared values that guide how they participate in the network and interact with their peers.

- **Mutual respect.** Participants commit to respecting each other's views and perspectives, even when they differ. This is a key ingredient for building trust that is essential for a strong network.
- **Listening and open-mindedness.** Participants understand that waiting for one's turn to speak is different than actively listening to Network partners. Participants commit to reflect on and seek to understand and respect partners' perspectives and ideas.

- **Constructive engagement.** Participants commit to engaging in productive ways that offer honest but constructive feedback. Participants proactively share feedback, recognizing that silence around key concerns can undermine the Network's success. Critical feedback focuses on observations about and analysis of ideas, not on criticisms of people.
- **Discretion.** Participants recognize the information, ideas, and strategies shared through Network interactions may be sensitive. Participants commit to being proactive about identifying sensitive information, and to being discrete in what they share with others within and outside of the Network. This discretion is another important ingredient for building trust that is essential for a strong Network.
- **Shared ownership.** Participants recognize that the Network is a collective endeavor and that its success requires both compromise and commitment. Partners recognize that all the participating organizations have their own unique interests, goals, strategies, and programs (driven by boards, staff, and other constituencies) that they need to navigate. Network participants must continually balance the pull of individual organizations' needs and expectations with those of the Network, with the aim of holding a critical mass of partners together in working towards shared goals and outcomes.
- **Inclusiveness.** Participants commit to the principle and practice of inclusion in Network design and discussions, recognizing that small groups are often needed to develop momentum and make decisions. Inclusion can be expanded through creating varied opportunities for partners to engage and have substantial influence on decision making and setting priorities. Participants recognize that a broad tent is needed to align and catalyze action, and they work to continually balance tensions inherent between inclusion and rapid action.
- **Cultural Competency.** Create a culture of inclusion that will promote a sense of belonging, especially for people of color and organizations who support communities of color, both within our existing Network membership and those across the Hill Country. The Network can try to attract diversity, but it needs clear policies and practices that encourage people to stay and engage, feel respected, and included. One of the most impactful ways to create inclusive culture is through DEI training and continued learning, starting with the DEI Committee.

# Attachment 4: THCCN Operating Agreement

## Operating Agreement

### OPERATING AGREEMENT FOR

#### **Texas Hill Country Conservation Network a program of Hill Country Alliance, a Texas nonprofit corporation**

This operating agreement, as agreed to under the Bylaws of the Hill Country Alliance (“HCA”), governs the affairs of the Texas Hill Country Conservation Network (the “Network”).

**1. Purpose.** The Network is organized and operated to significantly scale up the impact of conservation-focused organizations working to protect the natural resources and rural heritage and quality of life in the Texas Hill Country. The Network defines conservation broadly to include not just ecological and natural resource dimensions, but also economic and social dimensions—recognizing the value of people and nature thriving together on the landscape. In addition to increasing impact on the ground, the THCCN seeks to increase the visibility of existing collaboration among conservation-focused organizations and institutions, and to enable and support these organizations to efficiently expand and scale their ambition, activities, and collective impact. The THCCN also provides a clearer network platform from which conservation-focused organizations can work together to engage with other networks of stakeholders who are vital to long-term conservation and stewardship in the Hill Country—such as landowners, businesses, farmers and ranchers, local and county officials in the Hill Country, city and county leaders in the urban areas at the edges of the Hill Country, state and federal government agencies, outdoor and hunting enthusiasts, tourism industry members, and many other groups.

**2. Steering Committee.**

2.1. Management of the Network. The Network shall be managed through a Co-Chair model, with one Co-Chair position being housed at HCA, and the other being revisited on an annual basis. A Steering Committee elected in accordance with the provisions of this section shall manage the Network’s affairs. A Network Manager shall be hired as an employee of Hill Country Alliance. The Network Manager will be directed by the Network Co-Chair in collaboration with the HCA Executive Director.

2.2. Number, Qualification and Tenure of Steering Committee Members.

2.2.1. Composition. The Network Steering Committee will consist of a minimum of 6 At-Large Members but no more than 12 At-Large Members at any time.

2.2.2. Term. Each At- Large Member will serve for 2 years with the opportunity for renewal.

*Current Steering Committee roster and terms can be found [here](#).*

- 2.2.3. Other Characteristics. To the extent it is possible to do so, the Steering Committee shall seek to include members with diverse professional skills and technical expertise, diverse geographic representation of the Texas Hill Country, and diverse demographic backgrounds. Candidates shall be recruited for their individual experience and qualities that may best serve the Network's needs.
- 2.3. Nominating Steering Committee Members. Any current Steering Committee member may nominate a representative to an open chair on the steering committee. The Steering Committee may choose to create a Nominating Committee to recruit new members. If a Nominating Committee is formed, nominations shall move through the Committee.
- 2.4. Electing Steering Committee Members. A person who meets the desired characteristics who has been nominated may be elected as a Steering Committee member. New members may be elected at a regular Steering Committee meeting by a majority vote of Steering Committee members in attendance. The individual elected will begin their term of service at the next regular meeting of the Steering Committee.
- 2.5. Regular Meetings. The Steering Committee may provide for regular meetings by resolution stating the time and place of such meetings. No notice of regular Steering Committee meetings is required other than a resolution stating the time and place of the meetings.
- 2.6. Special Meetings. Special meetings may be called by the Steering Committee as needed to conduct business.
- 2.7. Quorum. A majority of the total number of Steering Committee members in attendance constitutes a quorum for transacting business at any Steering Committee meeting.
- 2.8. Delegating Duties. The Steering Committee may select advisors and delegate duties and responsibilities to them. The Steering Committee may not take any action which would involve or require the expenditure of the Network's program funds by an amount not previously approved by the HCA Executive Committee or without the written approval of the HCA Executive Committee.
- 2.9. Actions of the Steering Committee. The Steering Committee shall try to act by consensus; however, if a consensus is not available, the vote of a majority of members present and voting at a meeting at which quorum is present is enough to constitute the act of the Steering Committee. A Steering Committee member who is present at a meeting and abstains from a vote is considered to be present and voting for the purpose of determining the Steering Committee's decision.
- 2.10. Proxies. A Steering Committee member may not vote by proxy.
- 2.11. Compensation. Steering Committee members will not receive compensation for their services. A Steering Committee member may serve the Network in any other capacity and receive compensation for those services as is reasonable and commensurate with services



performed.

2.12. Removing Steering Committee Members. The Steering Committee members may vote to remove any elected member at any time only for good cause. Good cause for removal of an elected member includes the unexcused failure to attend two (2) consecutive regular meetings. An elected member may be removed by the affirmative vote of a majority of the Steering Committee members.

### 3. **Executive Committee.**

3.1. Composition. The Network's Executive Committee shall include two Co-Chairs, with one Co-Chair position being housed at HCA and the second Co-Chair position being revisited annually, and up to two (2) representatives of the Network working groups. The Executive Committee will provide consistent guidance for the Network, aid in developing agendas for Steering Committee meetings, and provide regular points of contact and oversight for the Network Manager.

3.2. Election and Term of Office. The network's Executive Committee members shall be elected annually at the first regular meeting of the calendar year by Steering Committee members and serve staggered two (2) year terms. In the instance of forming the first Executive Committee, the term may extend to 18 months to allow for one full calendar year to be completed by the Executive Committee. Upon election to the Executive Committee, the Executive Committee term will supersede the Steering Committee term.

*Current Executive Committee roster and terms can be found [here](#).*

3.3. Vacancies. The Steering Committee may select a person from among the members at large to fill a vacancy in the Executive Committee position for the unexpired portion of the officer's term.

3.4. Co-Chairs. The Co-Chairs shall act as the Network's chief executive officers. They shall supervise and control all of the Network's business and affairs.

#### **4. Working Groups.**

- 4.1. Establishing Working Groups. The Steering Committee may adopt a resolution establishing one or more working groups delegating specified authority to a working group and appointing or removing members of a working group. A working group may include persons who are not Steering Committee members. The Steering Committee may establish qualifications for membership on a working group.
- 4.2. Authorization of Specific Working Groups. The following working groups are authorized: Climate Change, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice, Land, Night Skies, and Water. The steering committee shall define the activities and scope of authority of each working group by resolution.
- 4.3. Actions of the Working Groups. Working groups shall try to take action by consensus. Each working group shall also document their decision-making process as well as who has been involved to the best of their ability. If that consensus is not available, the vote of a majority of working group members present and voting at a meeting in which quorum is present is enough to constitute the act of the working group. If quorum is not present, voting will occur through email.
- 4.4. Proxies. A working group member may not vote by proxy.

5. **Affiliate Partners.** The Network is comprised of a group of more than 150 non- governmental and nonprofit organizations, businesses, universities, landowners, and government agencies (“Affiliates”). The Network Steering Committee may set and change the amount of an initiation fee, if any, and the annual dues payable to the Network by Affiliates, if any. The Steering Committee may adopt and amend the application procedures for Affiliate membership in the Network.

#### **6. Financial Transactions of the Network.**

- 6.1. Contracts. The HCA executive director may enter into a contract or execute and deliver any instrument in the name of, and on behalf of the Network. Other members of the Steering Committee may enter into a contract on behalf of the Network in instances where the Network Steering Committee approved an institution other than HCA to serve as lead administrator for a grant- or contract-funded project.
- 6.2. Deposits. Network funds, excluding those funds administered by Network- affiliated institutions due to grant or contract requirements, shall be deposited to the credit of Hill Country Alliance in banks, trust companies or other depositories the HCA board selects. Such funds will be designated within the HCA budget for Network administration and activities.
- 6.3. Gifts. HCA may accept, on behalf of the Network, any contribution, gift, bequest or device for the general purposes or for any special purpose of the Network.

**7. *Special Procedures Concerning Meetings.***

7.1. Meeting by Telephone. The steering committee and any working group of the Network may hold a meeting by telephone or teleconference.

7.2. Voting by Email. The steering committee, executive committee and teams may allow voting by email when necessary.

**8. *Amending the Operating Agreement.*** This operating agreement may be amended or repealed, and new guidelines adopted by a majority vote of the steering committee.

This Operating Agreement was adopted at a meeting of the steering committee for the Texas Hill Country Conservation Network held on March 29, 2023.

By: 

Print: Katherine Romans

Texas Hill Country Conservation Network Co-Chair