

'THE PEDERNALES'

Symposium explores land, water connection

Conservation, land restoration helps rivers, waterways

By Ken Esten Cooke

Healthy land means healthy rivers, a crowd of about 200 heard at a Pedernales River forum.

The Texas Water Symposium, held last Thursday at the Hill Country University Center, was entitled "The Pedernales: Challenges and Opportunities Facing an Iconic Hill Country River Basin." A panel discussed the 120-mile river and its 800,000-acre catchment area, which is being affected by a variety of factors that have negatively affected other Texas waterways.

"Texas loses rural and agricultural land faster than any other state," said Andrew Sansom, the moderator who is director of the Meadows Center for Water and the Environment at Texas State University in San Marcos. "The biggest danger to it is the fragmentation of family land, so we must find a way to keep large ranch tracts intact," he said.

To illustrate that, Sansom said in 1928 when a utility pipeline was initially laid, it crossed 10 landowners' ranches. When it was removed in 2013, it crossed more than 1,000 landowner property lines.

Sansom, who splits his time between his Austin and Stonewall residences, said the Pedernales provides more than 70,000 acre-feet of water as it recharges the Colorado River, providing water for nearly one million people downstream.



PANELISTS Mark Steinbach, left, executive director of the Texas Land Trust, and Pam Mabry Bergman, landowner, listen to Clinton Bailey, director of public works and utilities for the City of Fredericksburg. Panelists discussed conservation and land restoration, which can affect river health. At right is moderator Andrew Sansom, director of the Meadows Center for Water and the Environment in San Marcos. Sansom resides part-time in Stonewall.

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Efforts

Panelists discussed conservation efforts, ranging from city initiatives in Fredericksburg, to private ranch owner efforts of clearing, combating overgrazing and returning native habitat.

Clinton Bailey, director of public works and utilities for the City of Fredericksburg, said the state's conditions are "close to the drought of record" in the 1950s.

"The city must have a five-year drought contingency plan and also a water conservation plan," he said.

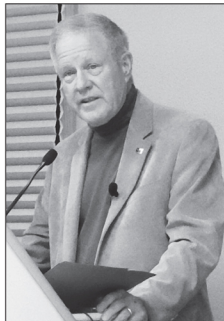
Conservation is being encouraged through progressive water rates, the use of smart meters, the reuse of wastewater, and a leak-detection

program, which he said has recaptured between five and 15 percent of city water by fixing leaks.

"It's also about raising awareness, and we have campaigns in local schools to start with the young people," he said.

Pam Mabry Bergman and her husband donated their tract of land to the Hill Country Land Trust. Their 685 acres was covered with invasive cedar, but has responded well with removal and prescribed burns.

"It was a straight-up learning curve for us," Bergman said. "But once we began planting native seeds and using prescribed burns, the springs and seeps began flowing again."



Howard Hicks, a Bandera County native who has ranch land near Willow City, said he had been cutting juniper and cedar all of his life. "A canopy of juniper actually stops water from reaching the ground," Hicks said.

Hicks said many landowners are tempted to run more animals on their land, which can lead quickly to overgrazing.

"We used to think the more cattle or more sheep we run, the more money we make," he said. "Well, that's only true to a point."

He said overgrazed, over-fertilized land can damage topsoil and waterways.

Growing effects

Tim Birdsong, ecosys-

tem assessment chief for Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, said there are landowner incentive programs that can help the health of rivers and streams.

"Unlike in our more urban areas, the Pedernales currently has only about five to 10 percent impervious ground cover in its catchment area," Birdsong said. "There is an opportunity here in the Hill Country to restore and preserve land and keep the river healthy."

Bailey said people who aren't landowners rarely think about how their habits can affect river quality.

"We don't think about how herbicide and fertilizer application can affect the quality of the water downstream," he said. Bailey said fertilizer washed into drains and streams can affect the quality of water from creeks to the city's own effluent in its wastewater treatment plant.

Easements

Mark Steinbach, executive director of the Texas Land Conservancy, said some landowners choose to set up their estates in a way that limits development rights for current and future generations, thus preserving the land.

"Within your property rights are issues dealing with hunting leases, oil and gas leases and other types of uses," he said. "Conservation easements are a negotiation between landowners and a qualified entity, and development is the part that is negotiated."

He said there is a misperception that succeeding landowners are unable to get the benefits from it.

"There are brokers who spe-

cialize in these types of transactions. This is not a hindrance to the sale," he said.

Bergman added that her land may be subdivided between her three children, if they choose to do so, providing flexibility for her descendants.

Hicks said that costs to landowners include those of appraisals, and a reduced value for subdividing it.

"My family wanted to preserve the land the way it was when it was settled, so that was our choice," he said.

Sansom added that there are choices for families who can't afford to donate their land, including the funds in the recently passed federal Farm Bill which can include the purchase of development rights for landowners who wish to release those.

A question-and-answer session touched on what city dwellers, who do not own large plots of land, can do.

Drip irrigation, watching fertilizer runoff and converting St. Augustine lawns, which is a Caribbean imported grass from a part of the world that receives much more rainfall.

An audience member remarked that 70 percent of municipal water use still goes toward landscaping.

Sansom said water conservation education efforts are starting in elementary schools around the state.

"Our children may help teach us how to more effectively use our water faucets," Sansom said.

The symposium was part of an ongoing collaboration between Schreiner University, Texas Public Radio, Hill Country Alliance and the Hill Country Land Trust.