



Issue: Hill Country Water Resource Myths and Truths

Photo By: Marvin Gohlke Jr.

HCA is a passionate community caring for the unique features, spring-fed streams, heritage ranch lands, spectacular beauty and vibrant culture of the Texas Hill Country for the benefit of future generations.



Water resources are among the Hill Country's most fragile assets and they are in jeopardy. Thousands of free-flowing springs feed our creeks and rivers with clean, cool water — contributing to the long-term health, quality of life and economic vitality of this region. As more people move to the Texas Hill Country, it is important to dispel the common and long-held misperceptions relating to Central Texas' water resources and to keep our attention on the importance of clean, flowing water.



Photo By: Mike Murphey

MYTH: Water resources will be replenished when the rains return. Although rain will provide some relief to drought conditions, it is important to remember that in many parts of Texas more water is allocated than nature can provide. Even when the rains return, our state's water resources remain at risk of degradation and depletion through poor management, over-commitment, population growth, and dry climate conditions. That is not to say that Texas will "run out" of water. Current and future water needs can be addressed by improvements in landscape stewardship, conservation, infrastructure improvement, smart management, appropriations, and efficiency. The bottom line is that even with a normal amount of rainfall, we will all have to use less water as we continue to grow.

MYTH: With technology and engineered solutions, we can build our way out of Texas' water problems. Building infrastructure to compensate for water scarcity has been a popular solution for many reasons. We often favor the construction of pipelines, dams, and desalination plants over conservation measures because it outsources the solution instead of changing inefficient habits. Large-scale infrastructure is especially expensive and has traditionally been funded by federal dollars. As these funds dwindle, more strain will be placed on state and local resources to improve aging infrastructure. In the meantime, a number of much less expensive local alternatives are available to us today. Moving away from turf grass, repairing leaky water systems, using gray water for irrigation and industrial uses, and harvesting rainwater are all more cost effective, efficient, and responsible.

MYTH: (name your villain) is responsible for water scarcity in Texas. Many people feel that if it weren't for [insert water villain here] we could eliminate the water scarcity problems in Texas. Some of the favored villains include golf courses, cedar or Ashe juniper trees, swimming pools, green lawns, cities, industry, and agriculture. In fact, we all contribute to demand and there is opportunity for all of us to improve our water management practices.

MYTH: Conservation is expensive and limits economic growth. Conservation develops the greatest quantity of new water at the least expense. However, because environmental regulations and restrictions can carry a higher initial cost, public and private decisions often degrade the long-term economic value of healthy land and water resources. Keeping Central Texas' business climate and population healthy will require a reliable supply of clean water. Our goal should be to align future economic development and prosperity with water-conscious practices.



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MYTH: Other than lawn watering restrictions, the drought doesn't really affect me. When drought strikes, water resources are stretched thin, and yes watering the lawn will get more expensive and will be restricted. Beyond that, the costs of electricity, manufactured goods, and everything at the grocery store will rise. Wildfire becomes a very real danger. Tourism and recreation decline on our lakes, rivers, and bays. Fish and game populations decline. Half a billion shade trees and untold plants and animals died in the drought of 2011. Some communities have actually run out of water. No matter where you live in Texas, the drought affects you.

MYTH: "Someone Else" is handling it. Many are trying to tackle big questions about water resource planning, including water marketers. Many aspects of our regulatory environment currently favor water marketing and are often not in the best public interest. Local municipalities, river authorities, and groundwater conservation districts are doing the best they can with limited resources to preserve and protect our water supplies. Every five years, Texas provides a Water Plan as a blueprint. The Water Plan is actually the culmination of regional water plans that are created by stakeholder groups made up of diverse interests and expertise. Both the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the Texas Water Development Board have the power to change rules and policies, but the process is slow. The most reliable "someone else" is you.

MYTH: Land and water are two separate resources. Proper planning and land use is critical to long-term healthy water resources. Without conscientious planning, land use can have adverse effects on water quality and supply. Disturbed soil and impervious surfaces decrease groundwater percolation and increase erosive runoff that can damage vegetation, increase water temperatures, and spread pollutants. Damage can be mitigated by evaluating the land and water resources in the area, establishing community goals, directing development to the most appropriate region of a watershed, promoting opportunities for restoration, and monitoring initiatives for potential changes to promote watershed health. Healthy landscapes help deliver and keep clean water in your rivers and aquifers.

MYTH: Reservoirs are the best places to store water.

Following the 1950s drought, Texas built dozens of reservoirs with federal dollars to store water. Today, water levels in Texas reservoirs are below 60 percent of capacity. Some municipal reservoirs have dried up. Biologists know that reservoirs can contribute to stream degradation, ecosystem alteration, loss of healthy fisheries, inadequate dissolved oxygen, and many other problems. Over time, reservoirs lose a significant amount of storage capacity due to siltation from soil erosion. These large open-water areas also experience very high rates of evaporation in our hot Texas climate. Often, the Highland Lakes will lose more water to evaporation in a year than the City of Austin consumes in the same period of time. Reservoirs can be great places to catch water, but, compared to modern aquifer storage and recharge projects, they are poor places to store water.

MYTH: Texas law will protect my groundwater.

Beginning in 1904, Texas courts have repeatedly affirmed the Texas groundwater law known as "the rule of capture," which allows landowners to pump as much water as they see fit for beneficial use. This law will not protect your groundwater when your neighbor's more powerful pump makes your well or springs run dry. As the state's preferred method of groundwater management, only groundwater conservation districts have the authority to take the steps necessary to manage groundwater and restrict the rule of capture.

MYTH: There is nothing I can personally do to ease this water shortage. Farmers are adapting through methods such as switching to less water-intensive crops and extra-efficient drip irrigation systems. Residential users are landscaping with native species and buying rain barrels. Municipalities invest in gray-water reuse and enforce management plans when water resources run low. There is still a great deal of work to be done because rainfall in Texas is not always dependable. Start by knowing your water supplier, request a copy of their contingency plan, do what you can in your home, and be sure to look outdoors to see what changes you can make in your own landscaping to save water. Get involved in your local planning process. Last but not least, get the word out. Talk about the issues with your friends and neighbors and educate yourself on the challenges and solutions.

What is HCA?

The Hill Country Alliance is a nonprofit organization whose purpose is to raise public awareness and build community support around the need to preserve the natural resources and heritage of the Central Texas Hill Country. We create resources, conversations and forums for landowners, neighbors, elected officials and all concerned citizens. Interested in staying connected to this and other land, water and scenic beauty issues in the Hill Country?



Please visit www.hillcountryalliance.org and click "subscribe" to receive our weekly newsletter with news, events and updates.

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