

A photograph of a deer running through a field of tall grass. In the background, there are several trees and a body of water under a clear sky. The text "2023 ANNUAL REPORT" is overlaid in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters.

2023 ANNUAL REPORT



hill country alliance

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

As I sit down to write another annual report letter, I can't help but feel an overwhelming sense of pride and gratitude. 2023 marked my 10th year with the Hill Country Alliance. In that time, we have doubled our staff, been a part of generating tens of millions of new dollars of investment in conservation and stewardship across our region, and supported the grassroots efforts that are changing the future of the Hill Country as we know it.

HCA released an unprecedented number of new tools, reports, and guides in 2023. If you have not had a chance to learn about land stewardship techniques in upland areas, please visit our new Hillside Stewardship guide under our land conservation and stewardship page on the website. If you are an elected official or resident of a rural community, check out our new Leading by Example Guidebook, an introduction to some of the conservation-focused policies that cities and towns can implement to protect natural resources. Worried about groundwater supplies and spring flow? Check out our primer titled Tools for Managing Groundwater in the Texas Hill Country, a new overview of how some of our most precious water supplies are planned for and protected.

While the grips of extreme drought have maintained their hold on the Hill Country, there were numerous bright spots in 2023. We were so impressed by the phenomenal success of the first-ever Hill Country Leadership Institute. Our inaugural cohort of 14 elected officials brought enthusiasm, passion, curiosity, and determination to 10 in-person meetings, and are forming the initial bonds of a broader coalition of community leaders ready to tackle the biggest challenges our region faces.

The Leadership Institute program, and all the work of the Hill Country Alliance, would not be possible without your support. Our heartfelt thanks go out to all who attended events, spoke at the Capitol, submitted comments to agency permitting processes, and championed the Hill Country in ways big and small. It is through your dedication that we continue to make strides in safeguarding this cherished region.

As we turn the calendar to 2024, we are looking ahead. HCA will begin celebrating our 20th anniversary this year, as we mark the original living room conversations that eventually led to the launch of HCA as we know it. The theme of our year will be centered on deepening our roots, growing our impact, and ensuring our future. I hope you will join us in that work. Together, we can make a lasting impact on the Texas Hill Country, leaving a legacy of beauty, vibrancy, and natural wonders for generations to come.

I'm for the Hill Country,

Katherine Romans

Katherine Romans
Executive Director



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HCA supporters celebrate the organization's 10-year anniversary at the Albert Dance Hall in Stonewall in 2015



(From right to left) Former HCA staff including current HCA Executive Director Katherine Romans, and founding Executive Director Christy Muse at an HCA event in 2014.



Present day HCA staff strike a goofy pose at the 2023 Staff Retreat.

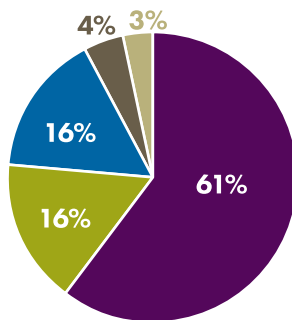
FUNDRAISING AND FINANCIALS

Some highlights for the year include:

- » Added nearly 230 new donors from 2022–2023.
- » Average gift amounts increased by 23 percent.
- » Successful end-of-year matching gift goal raised an additional \$50,000 in support.

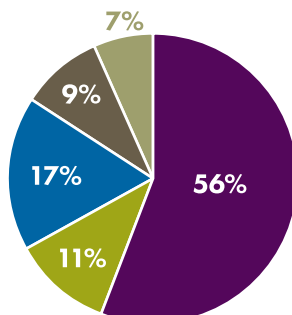
INCOME

Foundations	\$1,050,500
Individuals	\$279,810
Org/Govt	\$272,311
Other	\$78,003
Corporations	\$55,326
Total	\$1,735,950



EXPENSES

Programs	\$784,707
Network	\$157,758
Education & Outreach	\$240,692
Administrative	\$129,508
Fundraising	\$91,811
Total	\$1,404,476



2023 Snapshot of the Hill Country Winners



GRAND PRIZE Hawkeye. Alan Zhou



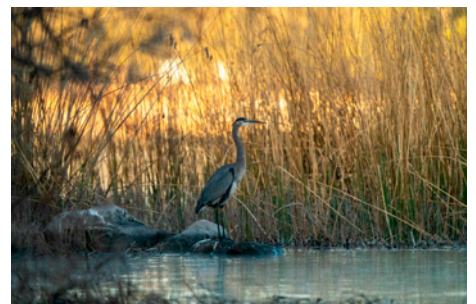
FIRST PLACE Enchantment. Rob Knerr



SECOND PLACE United. Joseph Richards

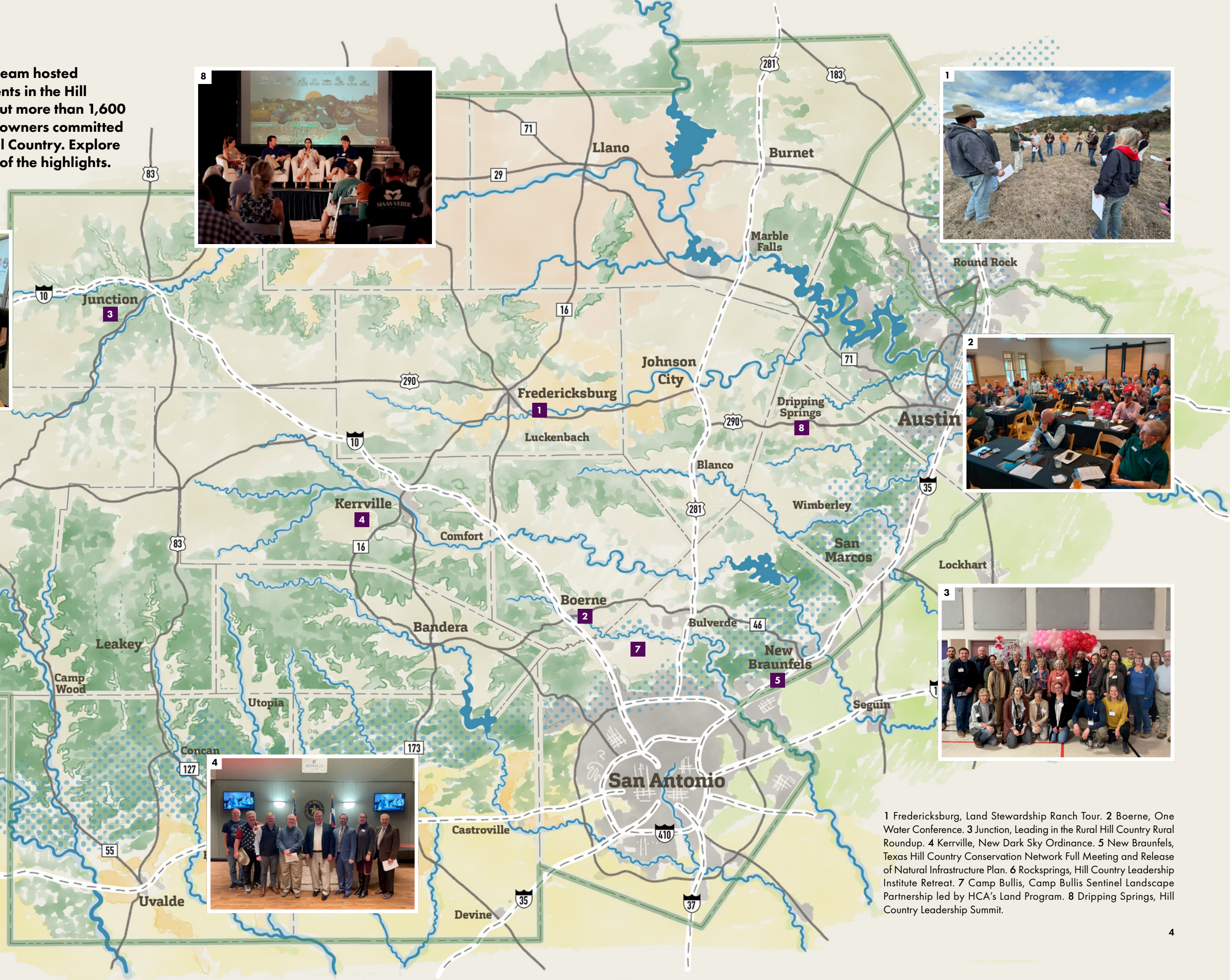
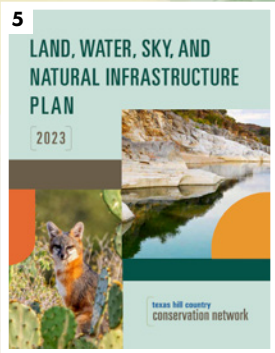


THIRD PLACE Middle Creek. Wade Blissard



PEOPLE'S CHOICE Great Blue Morning. Michael Kinder

In 2023, the Hill Country Alliance team hosted or presented at more than 160 events in the Hill Country and beyond — bringing out more than 1,600 partners, locals, leaders, and landowners committed to a shared vision for the Texas Hill Country. Explore the map below for a look at some of the highlights.



1 Fredericksburg, Land Stewardship Ranch Tour. 2 Boerne, One Water Conference. 3 Junction, Leading in the Rural Hill Country Rural Roundup. 4 Kerrville, New Dark Sky Ordinance. 5 New Braunfels, Texas Hill Country Conservation Network Full Meeting and Release of Natural Infrastructure Plan. 6 Rocksprings, Hill Country Leadership Institute Retreat. 7 Camp Bullis, Camp Bullis Sentinel Landscape Partnership led by HCA's Land Program. 8 Dripping Springs, Hill Country Leadership Summit.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

NETWORK

With a mission to maximize natural resource protection through enhanced collaboration, the Texas Hill Country Conservation Network — led by HCA's Josh Sendejar — is bringing together non-profits, academic institutions, government agencies, and businesses to address our most pressing conservation challenges.

- » Hosted two full Network meetings and 18 Network Team meetings, fostering connection and collaboration between our partners across the Hill Country.
- » Launched a standalone website — OurTXHillCountry.org
- » Released the Hill Country Land, Water, Sky, and Natural Infrastructure Plan to create a shared vision for the Hill Country and identify how protecting our natural landscapes can provide a multitude of benefits for nature and our communities alike.
- » Updated the Network's strategic plan, now spanning 2024–2028.
- » Continued leading conversations around diversity, equity, inclusion and justice in conservation in the Hill Country.



Network partners on a Yanaguana Missions Tour with American Indians in Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions.

LAND

HCA's Land Program, led by Daniel Oppenheimer and Rachel Seets, is dedicated to promoting on-the-ground stewardship that benefits Hill Country lands, creeks, and rivers as well as bolstering conservation strategies to protect ranches, wildlife, and water resources.

- » Engaged over 670 landowners in 19 stewardship events, including hands-on riparian and hillside stewardship workshops as well as the annual Pedernales Landowner Potluck.
- » Released a new Hillside Stewardship Guide, which highlights practices to mitigate erosion, enhance groundwater infiltration, and boost productivity.
- » Camp Bullis Sentinel Landscape Partnership secured a \$723,000 grant from the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation to develop technical resources and started to roll out a \$5.1 million grant from the US Department of Defense towards strategic land conservation and restoration.
- » Convened over 240 partners across the Hill Country through meetings of the Camp Bullis Sentinel Landscape Partnership and the Hill Country Conservation Network's Land Team.
- » Supported landowner groups such as the Headwaters Alliance and Friends of the Little Blanco River Valley towards their respective goals of flowing springs and creeks.



HCA facilitates a training for NRCS staff on structures landowners and managers can use to mitigate erosion, enhance water infiltration, and establish vegetation.

HCA's water program unveiled the Hill Country's first Texas Runs on Water mural in Junction with the Blanco River Watershed Alliance, Texas Water Foundation, Texas Runs on Water, and Big Seed.



WATER

HCA's Water Program, led by Marisa Bruno, focuses on informing water planning and management processes, advocating for water policies that recognize the connection between groundwater and surface water, and promoting water infrastructure alternatives that wisely steward critical water resources in the Hill Country.

- » Partnered to create the first Hill Country Runs on Water mural in Junction.
- » Held grassroots gatherings both in-person and online and helped to start the Kerr County Water Alliance, which is currently pursuing nonprofit status.
- » Created a Groundwater Tools report, which highlights shared policy opportunities in the Hill Country and has informed numerous conversations with Groundwater Conservation Districts.
- » Published a County Tools report with the help of numerous partners across the region - and will dive deeper during a workshop with county commissioners in March 2024.
- » Advanced One Water in the Hill Country by hosting the first annual Hill Country One Water Conference in Boerne, helping Fredericksburg and Boerne pass One Water resolutions, and partnering with Junction, Bandera, and Camp Wood to pursue funding for resilient projects.
- » Defeated three new dam projects in the headwaters of Hill Country streams, alongside local partners!
- » Engaged with Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and Wastewater Conservation Coalition to achieve protections for Pristine Streams.

NIGHT SKY

HCA's Night Sky Program, led by Dawn Davies, engages communities across the region in night sky preservation efforts and convenes a broad spectrum of partners to minimize the spread of light pollution as the region grows.

- » Worked with Texan by Nature's Conservation Wrangler Program, receiving support and guidance on resources including a new program-centric video on dark sky preservation efforts.
- » Engaged more than 3,350 people by attending, hosting, and presenting at over 65 events — including a 15-session lunch and learn series on eclipse preparation, a star party for the Green Latinos National Conference, and presenting at both the Texan by Nature Conservation Summit and the Texas Women and Girls in STEM Summit.
- » Grew the Hill Country Eclipse Team by 60 percent — now over 600 people!
- » Expanded and supported ongoing night sky preservation efforts in the Hill Country by adding a 16th night-sky-based group — Liberty Hill Save Our Stars — to the Night Sky Team, celebrating the City of Bee Cave's designation as the Hill Country's 13th International Dark Sky Place, and assisting 15 additional communities and parks actively working toward their applications.
- » Received a \$25,000 grant from the Coypu Foundation to create the first ever Hill Country Night Sky Preservation Fund.



PHOTO Texan by Nature, Dawn Davies presents at the 2023 Texan by Nature Conservation Summit in Dallas.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS CONT.

COMMUNITY

HCA's Community Program, led by Cliff Kaplan, supports communities in their efforts to maintain their distinct character — from historic main streets to winding country roads — while they grow.

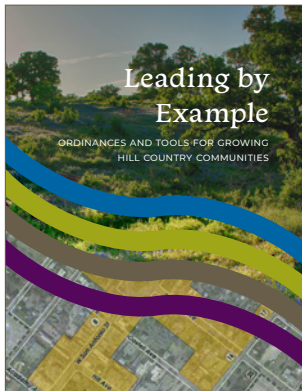
- » Hosted four Rural Roundup events in western Hill Country communities, focused on local community building and engaging over 150 grassroots leaders, as part of the Leading in the Rural Hill Country collaboration.
- » Published a new online resource for local policymakers and advocates, *Leading by Example: Ordinances and Tools for Growing Hill Country Communities*, featuring 20 local ordinances and policy tools on a variety of local planning and development subjects, complete with examples from the Hill Country and beyond.
- » Expanded the Texans for Responsible Aggregate Mining coalition and developed key relationships in the industry to advance policies necessary for a responsible aggregates and concrete industry in the Hill Country and throughout Texas.
- » Began the search for a Communities Program Manager to further support and grow our efforts!



Participants listen to local songwriter Lee Haile at the Community Program's Rural Roundup in Leakey.

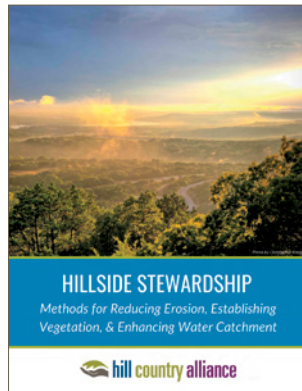
NEW RESOURCES

HCA helped to create many new resources in 2023 — see below for a few highlights and explore all these and more on our website at: hillcountryalliance.org/resources.



Leading by Example Guidebook

This guidebook is a resource for any Hill Country leader who wants to promote more thoughtful development in their community. It is broken into chapters focused on different local policies that can guide development that is protective of our local context, with examples from across our region.



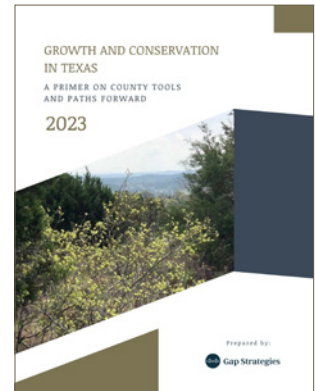
Hillside Stewardship Guide

Effective hillside stewardship balances healthy plant communities and soils with the landowner's goals for long-term land management. When landowners can slow and sink water into the land, this physical process provides a variety of benefits, including reduced erosion, increased soil moisture and grass production, flood mitigation, groundwater replenishment, habitat enhancement, and increasing the flow of spring-fed creeks.



Groundwater Management Tools

This resource from the Hill Country Alliance — created in May 2023 — is meant to demystify the available tools for groundwater management and make groundwater planning and management more accessible across the Hill Country.



County Tools Report

In 2022, a coalition of partners hired Gap Strategies to explore how counties in Texas are using their existing regulatory authorities to manage growth and steward natural resources in their communities. The results of this survey, as well as examples of innovation and ideas for the future are shared in an executive summary and published in a full (61-page) and abridged (12-page) report format.

Texas Hill Country Leadership Institute participants meet for an inspiring day at Wimberley's Blue Hole Primary — the first One Water school in Texas.

SPOTLIGHT: HILL COUNTRY LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

In 2023, the Hill Country Alliance launched the Hill Country Leadership Institute — a new, ten-month program for elected officials and key staff from across the Texas Hill Country, with a focus on local planning and natural resource management challenges and solutions.

From January to October, the inaugural cohort met twice monthly for in-person and virtual sessions on themes ranging from water infrastructure funding to transportation and development codes to engaging the Texas Legislature. Reviews and results of the first year of programming were overwhelmingly positive and the 2024 program is now underway with fifteen participants.



2023 Cohort:

Judge Bella Rubio, Real County
Judge Hal Rose, Kimble County
Commissioner Andra Wisian, Kendall County
Commissioner Jack Moseley, Bandera County
Commissioner Lon Shell, Hays County
Mayor Rebeca Gibson, Bandera
Mayor Darrin Schroeder, Castroville
Mayor Pro Tem Lisa Swint, Garden Ridge
Council Member Emily Kirchner, Fredericksburg
Council Member Joseph Macaluso, Boerne
City Manager Clinton Bailey, Fredericksburg
Planning Director Drew Paxton, Kerrville
GCD Board Member Ben Eldredge, Cow Creek GCD, Kendall County
GCD Board Member Curt Campbell, Cow Creek GCD, Kendall County

Program goals:

- » Connect local leaders to practical solutions for common challenges.
- » Strengthen the network of leaders aligned in their vision for our region.
- » Identify opportunities for stronger regional collaboration.

Direct Outcomes:

- » The City of Castroville has contracted their new Downtown Plan, Comprehensive Plan, and Unified Development Code with Simplecity Design and is also pursuing a Medina River restoration project with Native American Seed — both organizations who presented during Leadership Institute sessions.
- » The cities of Fredericksburg and Boerne each adopted resolutions directing staff to consider One Water strategies when developing or permitting public and private facilities, largely inspired by the Leadership Institute's session on One Water. More communities are expected to adopt similar resolutions in 2024.
- » Real County Judge Bella Rubio joined the Hill Country Alliance Board of Directors thanks to her positive experience getting to know HCA and our work through the Leadership Institute.
- » The Hill Country has a stronger network of local and state leaders who are aligned in a vision for the region. This network not only includes the Leadership Institute cohort itself, but also more than a dozen other officials who attended a Leadership Institute session to offer a welcome to their town and stuck around to learn more. Nine of the fifteen new 2024 cohort members were either directly referred to us by 2023 participants or attended a session as a guest during 2023.



WHO WE ARE: 2023 STAFF + BOARD

BOARD OF DIRECTORS:

President: David Yeates, Comal County
Vice President: Ben Eldredge, Kendall County
Secretary: Michelle Whitwell Pokorny, Bexar County
Treasurer: Jeff Harkinson, Blanco County
Vanessa Puig-Williams, Travis County
Connie Barron, Blanco County
Ted Flato, Real and Bexar Counties
Rebecca Gibson, Bandera County
Kathleen Krueger, Bandera and Comal Counties
Julie Lewey, Uvalde County
Bill Neiman, Kimble County
Roel Lopez, Ph.D., Bexar County
Dr. Leo Tynan, Gillespie County
Judge Bella Rubio, Real County

STAFF:

Katherine Romans, Executive Director
Cliff Kaplan, Program Director
Chanee Carlson, Director of Philanthropy
Daniel Oppenheimer, Land Program Director
Marisa Bruno, Water Program Manager
Dawn Davies, Night Sky Program Manager
Josh Sendejar, Texas Hill Country Conservation Network Manager
Leah Cuddeback, Storytelling and Public Engagement Manager
Sydney Beckner, Research and Project Manager
Rachel Seets, Landowner Outreach and Stewardship Manager
Sheila Holt, Office Manager
Emma Margulies, 2023 Kent Butler Student Intern



HCA Board Members Michelle Whitwell Pokorny and Ted Flato smile for the camera with HCA Executive Director, Katherine Romans at a Devils River Conservancy event.



Several HCA board and staff members pose with the Texas Runs on Water mural in Junction.





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The mission of the Hill Country Alliance is to bring together a diverse coalition of partners to preserve the open spaces, starry night skies, clean and abundant waters, and unique character of the Texas Hill Country.

COVER PHOTO Deer in Field. Alison Lyons
DESIGN Weston Sanders