

# 2024 ANNUAL REPORT



hill country alliance



## BECAUSE OF YOU!

**150+** Events presented at, hosted, or convened

**280+** Leadership Summit attendees

**23,508** tuned into our online outreach through social media and the Neighbor-to-Neighbor newsletter

**60+** articles in regional news and print media spotlighted the Hill Country Alliance, both in print and online across the region

**20** years of the Hill Country Alliance

**1 Hill Country** worth protecting for future generations

*"I think the Leadership Institute is one of the most important 'needle movers' I've seen. Y'all are changing perceptions and peoples' thinking by providing Hill Country leaders with **good, credible, actionable information** they might not otherwise even know about. When the Mayor of Mason, Texas, began telling me about One Water as we stood watching a beautiful morning in the Hill Country – **well, the times they are a changing sure 'nuf.**"*

**George Cofer**, Founding CEO (1999–2022)  
Hill Country Conservancy





Night Sky Program at UT Austin Girls in STEM Day.



Water Program convening of Pedernales Grassroots Groups at Westcave Preserve.

# FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

Dear Friends and Supporters,

It is with deepest gratitude that I sit down to pen another Annual Report letter from the Hill Country Alliance (HCA). Our efforts to protect and preserve the things that make the Hill Country so special have never felt more urgent. Ongoing drought, explosive development, and the incredible pace of change have us all feeling the tenuous nature of our hold on the Hill Country as we know it. That feeling is most clear and salient for me when I look to take my children to a Hill Country swimming hole to cool off in the heat of summer, only to find our favorite haunts dry and dusty. Unless we take steps to protect them, will the springs, creeks, and rivers of this beating heart of Texas be here in the next 50 years? In the next five?

And yet everywhere we look, reasons for optimism are sprouting. Neighbors are pushing back on "development-as-usual" patterns — and winning! Leaders are coming together to find new ways to incentivize growth that protects and enhances our natural resources. Opportunities are growing for more folks to connect to the Hill Country with the expansion of parks, trails, and protected open spaces. And the network of passionate individuals working to protect the Hill Country has never been stronger.

As you'll see in the pages of this report, HCA is creating deep and lasting conservation impacts in all of our program areas. We deepened our strategic focus on convening local leaders and elected officials from across the Hill Country in 2024. Our second year of the Hill Country Leadership Institute was a huge success. We brought together 15 local officials and key staff together for ten months of learning about topics as varied — and vital — as One Water infrastructure, local development planning, and legislative priorities. We hosted three County to County workshops, which brought together 50+ regional officials and staff from 11 counties for discussion centered on how counties can manage growth and preserve natural resources.

Water and land resource management remain cornerstones of our mission. This year, we supported grassroots water groups by helping launch the new nonprofit, Kerr County Water Alliance (KCWA), and supporting the Pedernales River Alliance in Gillespie County. We worked with partners in

the Camp Bullis Sentinel Landscape to deploy new funding to protect military readiness and support landowners' stewardship goals in the area around Joint Base San Antonio. Our efforts to advance One Water in the Hill Country included hosting the second annual Hill Country One Water Conference in Boerne and partnering with local cities to pursue funding for resilient projects.

Our Night Sky program embodies HCA's strategic approach to conservation in the region. Through this program alone we engaged more than 3,000 people in 2024. We worked with Texan by Nature's Conservation Wrangler Program to create a new Night Sky Lighting Guide and supported ongoing night sky preservation efforts across the region. We launched the first-ever Hill Country Alliance Night Sky Preservation Fund and awarded more than \$15,000 to support our partners in hosting events, creating outreach materials, and retrofitting lights. The stars at night will remain bright thanks to the collective efforts of so many dark sky champions.

This year we will celebrate 20 years of work for the Hill Country. We are eternally grateful for the incredible group of partners, supporters, collaborators and friends that we have built over those years, all bound by a shared passion for the Texas Hill Country. We hope we can count on your continued support as we embark on the next twenty years. Your generosity and dedication have been critical to our success. We couldn't do this without you.

I'm for the Hill Country,

**Katherine Romans**  
Executive Director



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Dripping Springs, TX 78620

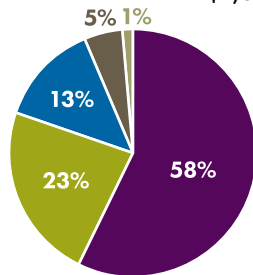
512-894-2214 (p)  
www.hillcountryalliance.org  
info@hillcountryalliance.org

# FUNDRAISING AND FINANCIALS

## INCOME

Foundations	\$1,062,738
Individuals	\$424,454
Org./Govt	\$248,166
Other	\$93,503
Corporations	\$20,926

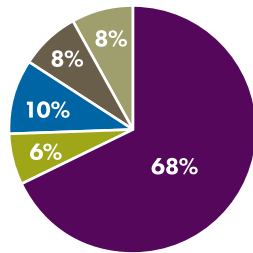
Total **\$1,849,787**



## EXPENSES

Programs	\$1,072,400
Network	\$101,902
Education & Outreach	\$154,676
Administrative	\$121,531
Fundraising	\$125,730

Total **\$1,576,239**



\*These represent unaudited year-end financials. For audited financials, please reach out to HCA or consult our annual 990 filings with the IRS.

*"Our focus has evolved to helping nonprofits **build capacity**. We have found that one of the best ways to accomplish this objective is through professional development. So, when Katherine told us about the opportunity for **professional development** for the staff, personal computers and a consultant to craft a strategy to expand the outstanding Leadership Institute, we **jumped at the chance** to help make these excellent 'capacity building' ideas a reality."*

**Chico Newman**, John & Florence Newman Foundation

## 2024 Hill Country Alliance Photo Contest Winners



**GRAND PRIZE** Sunset (Bexar County), Jesus Corona



**FIRST PLACE** Gruene Nights, Gary T. Ray



**SECOND PLACE** Danger in the Wildflowers, Bill Weekley

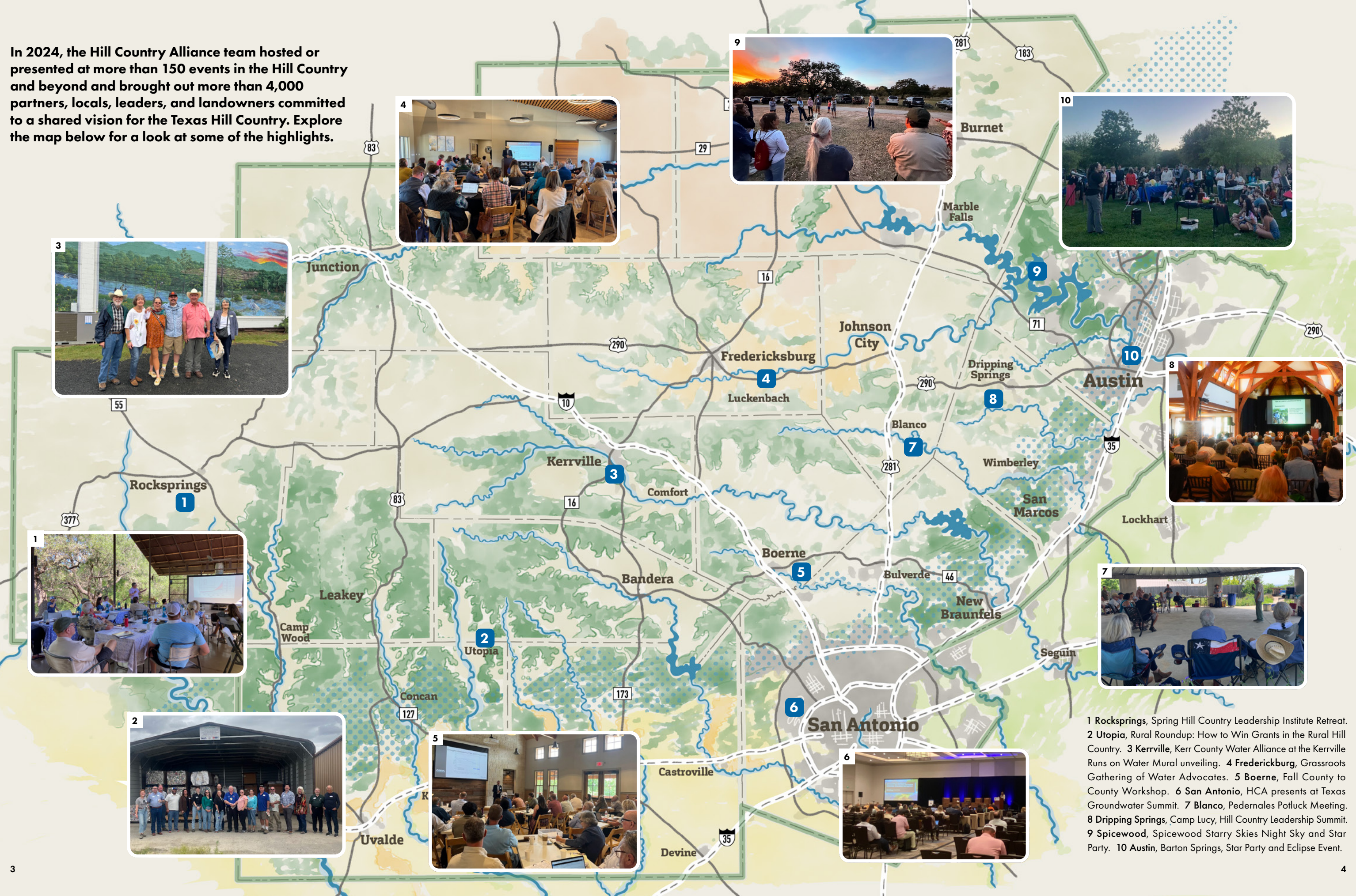


**THIRD PLACE** Gray Fox Up a Tree, Mike Zarella



**PEOPLE'S CHOICE** Bluebonnets and Live Oaks Road, William Shelton

In 2024, the Hill Country Alliance team hosted or presented at more than 150 events in the Hill Country and beyond and brought out more than 4,000 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 Rocksprings, Spring Hill Country Leadership Institute Retreat. 2 Utopia, Rural Roundup: How to Win Grants in the Rural Hill Country. 3 Kerrville, Kerr County Water Alliance at the Kerrville Runs on Water Mural unveiling. 4 Frederickburg, Grassroots Gathering of Water Advocates. 5 Boerne, Fall County to County Workshop. 6 San Antonio, HCA presents at Texas Groundwater Summit. 7 Blanco, Pedernales Potluck Meeting. 8 Dripping Springs, Camp Lucy, Hill Country Leadership Summit. 9 Spicewood, Spicewood Starry Skies Night Sky and Star Party. 10 Austin, Barton Springs, Star Party and Eclipse Event.

# PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

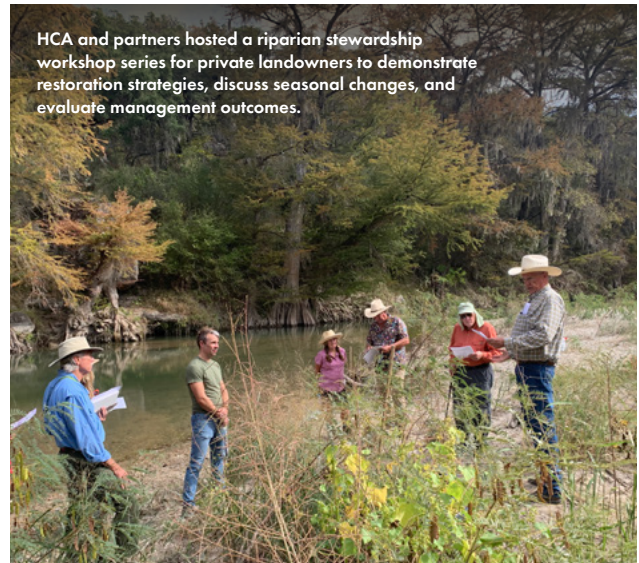
## LAND

**HCA's Land Program, led by Daniel Oppenheimer and Lauro Martinez, 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 nearly 1,000 land stewards in more than 25 events, including hands-on riparian field days along the Guadalupe River and hillside stewardship workshops in the Cibolo Creek & Pedernales River Basins.
- » Hosted our first train-the-trainer series for USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service & Texas Parks & Wildlife Department agency staff to highlight resources and innovative strategies for erosion control and riparian restoration.
- » Helped partners begin to roll out over \$22 million of USDA funding and an additional \$20 million of Kendall County Prop A funding for conservation easements with volunteering Hill Country landowners.
- » Convened 57 partner organizations to complete the first Camp Bullis Sentinel Landscape Partnership Implementation Plan, which will guide the next 5 years of collaboration.
- » Hired new Landowner Outreach and Stewardship Manager, Lauro Martinez, after the departure of Rachel Seets to Native Prairies Association of Texas.
- » Developed and circulated new educational resources on intergenerational stewardship as well as the pitfalls of rushing into land management.



HCA and Farmshare Austin hosted land managers to discuss challenges, resources, and opportunities for small-scale and urban agriculture.



HCA and partners hosted a riparian stewardship workshop series for private landowners to demonstrate restoration strategies, discuss seasonal changes, and evaluate management outcomes.

## WATER

**HCA's Water Program, led by Marisa Bruno, focuses on assisting grassroots groups that champion thoughtful water stewardship in their communities, advocating for state and local policies that protect groundwater and surface water, and promoting resilient water supplies in Hill Country communities through the advancement of One Water projects.**

- » Helped launch the new nonprofit, Kerr County Water Alliance (KCWA), and supported the Pedernales River Alliance in its fight against two new wastewater discharge permits in Gillespie County.
- » Partnered with nearly a dozen partners and local organizations to create a Hill Country Runs on Water mural in Kerrville and host a Blanco County Runs on Water art contest.
- » Hosted a 150+ person webinar on the dam permitting process, bringing together experts from state and federal agencies.
- » Advanced One Water in the Hill Country by hosting the second annual Hill Country One Water Conference in Boerne, piloting a "brown bag" presentation for cities with new One Water resolutions, and partnering with Johnson City, Bandera, and Camp Wood to pursue funding for resilient projects.

- » Increased county coordination for flood planning, impervious cover limits, and more protective groundwater policies through the County-to-County workshop series.
- » Pushed for policy changes during the 2025 Legislative session — from working with Bandera, Burnet, Kimble, and Kerr Counties and Senator Pete Flores to file a fix for HB 3697 to collaborating with the Wastewater Conservation Coalition to file a new spin on the 2021 pristine streams bill.



HCA and partners celebrating a win for pristine streams after the Liberty Hill TCEQ decision.

## NIGHT SKIES

**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.**

- » Engaged more than 3,000 people by attending, hosting, and presenting at over 50 events — from star parties to the 2024 total solar eclipse.
- » Worked with Texan by Nature's Conservation Wrangler Program to create a new Night Sky Lighting Guide and create an in-depth resource guide for Friends of the Night Sky Groups, set to launch in early 2025.
- » Expanded and supported ongoing night sky preservation efforts in the Hill Country — supporting new night sky groups in Real and Travis Counties, celebrating Shield Ranch's designation as the Hill Country's first Urban Night Sky Place, and assisting 17 additional communities and parks actively working toward their applications.
- » Launched the first-ever Hill Country Alliance Night Sky Preservation Fund to directly support regional nonprofit organizations, local governmental entities, and small businesses interested in protecting their views of the starry night sky.

## COMMUNITIES

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

- » Hosted three County-to-County Workshops for over 90 county commissioners and county staff, highlighting applications of existing county tools for managing growth on topics ranging from impervious cover to the aggregates industry, as well as planning for the Texas Legislative session.
- » Added two new steering committee members for Leading in the Rural Hill Country and hosted our largest Rural Roundup events yet in Kerrville and Utopia, focused on public art and grant applications.
- » Expanded and incorporated the Texans for Responsible Aggregate Mining coalition, applied for 501 c(3) nonprofit status, and continued to develop key relationships in the industry to advance a responsible aggregates and concrete industry in the Hill Country and throughout Texas.
- » Added three guides to the Leading by Example Guidebook, an online resource featuring Hill Country examples of 23 ordinance and policy tools - and continued presenting the guidebook to local policymakers and advocates across the region.



HCA's Night Sky Program supported an EPIC campout at Pecan Springs Karst Preserve and got to see starry skies and Comet Tsuchinshan



PHOTO Rosemary Galloway



In June, HCA helped host the Kerrville Rural Roundup at the Arcadia Theater.

# PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS CONT.

## NETWORK

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

- » Launched a new strategic plan spanning 2024–2028.
- » Established a new Night Sky Committee in coordination with HCA's Night Sky Team to enhance collaboration on improving outdoor lighting, measuring changes in our region's sky quality, and increase educational opportunities.
- » Hosted two full Network meetings and over a dozen Network Team meetings, fostering connection and collaboration with our partners across the Hill Country.
- » Began work with Siglo Group and Texas A&M Natural Resources Institute to update key metrics from the 2022 State of the Hill Country Report.
- » Continued leading conversations around community engagement and representation in conservation in the Hill Country.
- » Started the search for a new Network Manager, after the departure of Josh Sendejar to Texas Water Foundation.



## TESTIMONIALS

**To quote a few of our friends...**

*"In November, the Saratoga Underground Water Conservation District (SUWCD) in Lampasas County restored its minimum lot size for exempt wells from 2 acres back to 10 acres. HCA's water program resources and Marisa Bruno's guidance enabled this change. They brought facts to the SUWCD board, including surrounding districts' 10 acre rules and recent increases to 10 acres by other Texas districts. The coordinated approach outlined in HCA's 'Tools for Managing Groundwater Resources' suggests next steps to steward our groundwater for existing users and foster responsible development."*

**Mike Watson**

*"I went on a winter riparian restoration workshop, learned heaps, and took away great resources. The participants and staff created a rare opportunity to enjoy 'the best of Texas beauty and friendly.' **Nourished my brain and soul.**"*

**Sheila Armitage**

*"Dawn invested **countless hours** in preparing Austin for the total solar eclipse... She provided comprehensive eclipse information, training, and educational materials to **over 50 City of Austin Parks and Recreation Department staff**... We also thank the Hill Country Alliance for recognizing the importance of **Night Sky education** in Central Texas."*

**Austin Parks and Recreation**





# SPOTLIGHT: HILL COUNTRY LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

The 2024 Hill Country Leadership Institute held a spring retreat on groundwater management in Rocksprings.

In 2024, the Hill Country Leadership Institute entered into its second year, welcoming a new cohort of 15 elected officials and key staff from across the Texas Hill Country. This ten-month program brings participants together twice monthly for ten in-person sessions and nine virtual sessions focused on local planning and natural resource management challenges and solutions. This year's curriculum featured 77 subject experts, with topics ranging from water infrastructure funding to transportation and development codes to engaging the Texas Legislature. Reviews and results of the Leadership Institute remain overwhelmingly positive and former participants have continued to engage with and support the program. The 2025 program is now underway with 18 participants — our largest group yet.

### Direct Outcomes:

- » Hill Country Underground Conservation District, the Gillespie County Engineer, and the Travis County Natural Resources Office are exploring what Gillespie County can do to manage impervious cover in new developments.
- » The City of Kerrville is working with Native American Seed on an ecological restoration project.
- » Hays County Judge Ruben Becerra committed to ensuring that all new county buildings, including the new Indigenous Cultures Institute, will be designed with One Water principles.
- » Judge Cynthia Casburn has connected with Communities Unlimited to work on water issues in Sabinal and Uvalde County.
- » Real County adopted new subdivision regulations thanks to the leadership of Institute alum Judge Rubio and Commissioner Gray.
- » The Hill Country has a stronger network of local and state leaders, aligned in a vision for the region. This network includes Institute participants and over a dozen more officials who attended a 2024 Institute session as guests. Eleven of the 18 new 2025 cohort members were either directly referred to us by 2024 participants or attended a 2024 session.

### 2024 Cohort:

- COMMISSIONER **Ann Howard**, Travis County
- CITY COUNCILMEMBER **Bobby Watson**, Gillespie County
- GCD GENERAL MANAGER **Charlie Flatten**, Hays County
- MUNICIPAL JUDGE **Cynthia Casburn**, Uvalde County
- JUDGE **Daniel Jones**, Gillespie County
- ASST. CITY MANAGER **Garret Bonn**, Gillespie County
- MAYOR **Gina Fulkerson**, Hays County
- CITY COUNCILMEMBER **Laura Swinson**, Blanco County
- ASST. CITY MANAGER **Michael Hornes**, Kerr County
- GCD GENERAL MANAGER **Paul Babb**, Gillespie County
- MAYOR **Robert L. Rayburn**, Mason County
- JUDGE **Ruben Becerra**, Hays County
- COMMISSIONER **Shawn Gray**, Real County
- CITY ADMINISTRATOR **Stan Farmer**, Bandera County
- CITY COUNCILMEMBER **Teresa Taylor-Babb**, Blanco County

*"Participation in the Leadership Institute has been a **monumental milestone** in shaping my views on conservation. I can lead my community to action with the tools and rich networking this program has fostered."*

**Cynthia Casburn**, Sabinal

*"This program may be **the most valuable tool** we have to protect and strengthen the long term viability of the Hill Country."*

**Robert Rayburn**, Mason



# WHO WE ARE: 2024 STAFF + BOARD

## 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  
**Grace Gilker**, Communities Program Manager  
**Josh Sendejar**, Texas Hill Country Conservation Network Manager  
**Leah Cuddeback**, Storytelling and Public Engagement Manager  
**Sydney Beckner**, Operations Manager and TRAM Coordinator  
**Rachel Seets**, Landowner Outreach and Stewardship Manager  
**Lauro Martinez**, Landowner Outreach and Stewardship Manager  
**Sheila Holt**, Office Manager  
**Angela Enriquez**, 2024 Kent Butler Student Intern  
**Ivan Naranjo**, Research Solutions Intern

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**Kathleen Krueger**, Bandera + Comal Counties  
**Julie Lewey**, Uvalde County  
**Bill Neiman**, Kimble County  
**Dr. Leo Tynan**, Gillespie County  
**Judge Bella Rubio**, Real County  
**Charles "Tres" Plummer**, Kendall County  
**Karen Bruett**, Burnet County



\* Board of Directors officer positions listed based on December 2024 officer list. Positions change as board members depart the board. Full board list includes new members added throughout 2024. For the most up-to-date listing of HCA Board members, see our website at: [hillcountryalliance.org/about/hca-board-of-directors](http://hillcountryalliance.org/about/hca-board-of-directors).

\*\* Staff includes all staff of HCA throughout 2024.



PHOTO City of Fredericksburg



PHOTO Carolyn Whiteside



PHOTO Jacob Gonzalez



# THANK YOU!

Adrienne Frost  
Alamo Area Council of Governments  
Allan and Nancy Dyer  
Allison Samford  
American Online Giving Foundation, Inc.  
Amy Behlharz  
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Mary Grace Kuehne  
Mary Kelly  
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Michael Bryd

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Michelle Love  
Michelle Whitwell Pokorny  
Mike and Janie Watson  
Mike and Pam Reese  
Mike Poffenberger  
Mike Zarella  
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Mindy Conyers  
MixHaus Gallery  
Mona Lois Friday  
Monika Maেকে and Robert Rivard  
Ms. Diane McMahon  
Myron Hess  
Nandini Chaturvedula  
Naomi Heindel  
Natalie Amoroso  
Nate and Emily Sterken  
National Wildlife Federation  
Native American Seed  
Neil Alexander  
Noralinda Ureste  
Odie Waters  
Oscar Peraza  
Our Lady Of the Lake  
Ozona Bank  
Page Foshee  
Palo Alto Creek Farm  
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Pamela Hodges  
Pamela Painter  
Parc Smith  
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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.**

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