



Strategic Plan for 2018-2022

Adopted April 24, 2018



THCCN

TEXAS HILL COUNTRY
CONSERVATION NETWORK

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Executive Summary

Protecting the Hill Country

The Texas Hill Country is at a cross-roads. This iconic landscape filled with natural beauty and heritage-rich rural communities is facing tremendous threats from sprawling growth and development. Land fragmentation and consumption, coupled with groundwater pumping 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 wildlife, and rural character and small-town charm. The window of opportunity to keep the Texas Hill Country rural, natural, and scenic will likely close within our generation.

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

THCCN MISSION STATEMENT

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

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, 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.

THCCN Strategic Plan

The THCCN embarked upon a strategic planning process in the spring of 2017 to create a comprehensive organizational, membership, and governance structure and protocols for the Network that would increase organizational capacity and effectiveness. The objectives of the strategic plan are to articulate a strong value proposition for organizations to participate in the Network, to improve coordination and alignment of activities and messaging among conservation organizations and enhance prospects for scaling collective impact.

This strategic plan document was finalized in January 2018 and includes: identification of the problem the Network seeks to address; a statement of purpose for the Network; mission and vision statements; a description of how Network members will collaborate; six priority goal areas for 2018-2022 and suggested metrics to measure progress; an outline of the Network design and structure; a list of near-term priority activities; and a statement of the Network approach and values.

Priority Goals 2018-2022

The six priority goals in the strategic plan address a range of outcomes and impacts that the THCCN believes are important to make progress on over the next five years.

Landscape-Level Impact Goals: The first three goals focus on achieving tangible impacts in the Hill Country landscape – on land conservation and stewardship, and on water quantity and quality. In any network or collaborative endeavor, it is vital to keep strategic focus and activities oriented to making progress on tangible outcomes and impacts that make progress towards the network vision. These three goals are designed to help connect and align, where appropriate, participants’ individual and collective efforts towards impacts on the ground and in 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

Process and Systems Goals: THCCN participants recognize that 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 #4 and #5) 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 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 4:** Grow awareness and support for Hill Country conservation among the public and multiple levels of government
- **Goal 5:** Scale up investment in Hill Country conservation
- **Goal 6:** Build long-term partnerships for durable conservation of the Texas Hill Country

THCCN network participants 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. THCCN participants 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.

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 THCCN can play a transformational role in preserving the unique characteristics of the Texas Hill Country, ensuring that this extraordinary place will be experienced by Texans and visitors for generations to come.

Why develop a network?

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Texas Hill Country is an iconic landscape filled with natural beauty and heritage-rich rural communities that is at a cross-roads, 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.¹ 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, and rural character and small-town charm. 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. Climate change will further threaten the region in diverse ways, including increased frequency and severity of dry years, storms, and flooding. The window of opportunity to keep the Texas Hill Country rural, natural, and scenic will likely close within our generation.

There are numerous land and water conservation organizations working—and often working together—to protect land, water, and rural communities in the Hill Country. While there are many success stories, this collaborative work is not always visible and falls short of its full potential. In addition, the scale of conservation activity in the Hill Country is not commensurate with scale of the need and the challenge. In addition, key constituencies who presumably have a big stake in protecting the Texas Hill Country—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. It is in this context, that key conservation organizations and partners have come together to form the Texas Hill Country Conservation Network (THCCN) in 2017.

THCCN PURPOSE

The Texas Hill Country Conservation Network (THCCN) aims 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. Over the next few years, this means making substantial progress in protecting rural agricultural and ranch lands and open spaces, enhancing land stewardship and restoration activities, and mitigating threats to water quality and quantity in the region. The THCCN 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

¹ 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.

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. Strong and connected networks—or “networks of networks” of diverse partners—have proven vital to addressing the complexities of large landscape conservation across the U.S.²

What is our vision and mission?

THCCN VISION

Clear flowing springs. Wide open spaces. Starry night skies. Vistas of rolling green hills. Rivers and fields abundant with wildlife. Blooms of bluebonnets and wildflowers. Working farms and ranches. Vibrant, close-knit communities. Strong rural and small-town economies. Scenic country drives and hikes. Idyllic get-aways.

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 rural communities. The Hill Country landscape and communities will be better equipped to weather and bounce back from the impacts of a changing climate, such as 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.

THCCN MISSION

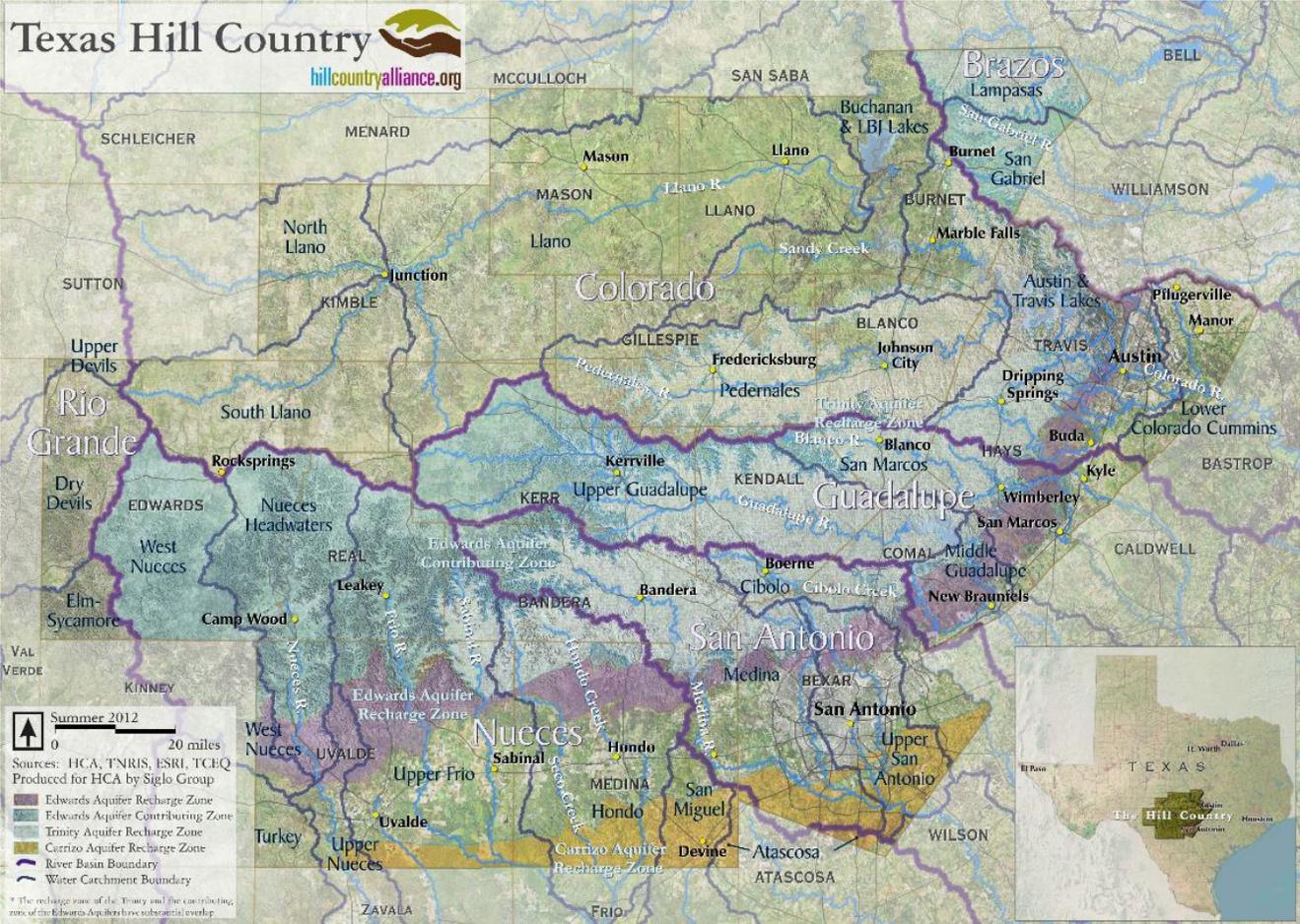
The Texas Hill Country Conservation Network (THCCN) mission is *to maximize the protection of the Hill Country’s natural resources through enhanced collaboration.*

THCCN GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS

The Texas Hill Country Conservation 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. While we commonly refer to county lines as we define this geography, it’s the natural water catchment boundaries and aquifer recharge areas that also matter. The THCCN recognizes the importance of areas to the west and east that affect the

² 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.

water resources and development pressures in Hill Country. In establishing priorities and collaborative efforts, the THCCN identifies priority sub-sections of this geography based on partnership opportunities, emergent threats, perceived strategic benefit, and overall need.



How will we work together to accomplish this vision?

HARNESSING DIVERSE CAPABILITIES AND CAPACITIES

The THCCN is not a new organization. Instead, it is a focused initiative to support existing organizations to work together in more visible and impactful ways. The THCCN 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:

- **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.
- **Outreach and education.** Raising awareness among diverse constituencies across the region to help them appreciate the unique characteristics of the Hill Country, the importance and benefits of conservation efforts in the Hill Country, and how they can help protect these characteristics.
- **Direct conservation and restoration actions.** Implementing restoration and permanent conservation projects in Hill Country 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 and training.** Providing expert advice, training, assistance, and incentives relevant to conservation to diverse constituencies from private landowners to local government officials to 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 with diverse people and groups 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.

Not all organizations participating in the THCCN conduct all these activities—in fact, most focus on just a few. However, THCCN participants appreciate the value that each of these (and other) activities and roles play. 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 THCCN aims to help support this linking and aligning to enhance ambition, activities, and collective impact.

What are we working to accomplish?

THCCN Priority Goals for 2018-2022

Organizations participating in the THCCN commit to working together on the priority goals outlined below over the next five years. The THCCN sees the coming decade as a vital window of opportunity to make significant advances in all of these areas, recognizing that this important work will need to continue beyond 2022, but that 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.

THCCN network participants 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. THCCN participants 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. During early 2018, THCCN participants will review these six goals to develop more specific, measurable targets and metrics, and to develop short 1-2 year action plans for each goal that would outline how THCCN network organizations aim to work individually and together to advance progress toward the goal over the next 1-2 years.

These six goals address a range of outcomes and impacts that the THCCN believes are important to make progress on over the next five years. The two major types of goals include:

- ***Landscape-Level Impact Goals:*** The first three goals focus on achieving tangible impacts in the Hill Country landscape – on land conservation and stewardship, and on water quantity and quality. In any network or collaborative endeavor, it is vital to keep strategic focus and activities oriented to making progress on tangible outcomes and impacts that make progress towards the network vision. These three goals are designed to help connect and align, where appropriate, participants' individual and collective efforts towards impacts on the ground and in communities.
- ***Process and Systems Goals:*** THCCN participants recognize that 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 #4 and #5) 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 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 for generations to come.

These six goals are outlined in more detail below.

LANDSCAPE-LEVEL IMPACT GOALS

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

2022 Targets:

Scale permanent land conservation and stewardship practices by:

- Permanently protecting a substantial amount of land in the Hill Country (target number of acres to be determined),
- Increasing by 10-fold the number of private landowners conducting recognized stewardship practices on their lands,
- Having at least two model low impact development projects under development in the Hill Country.

Focused attention is needed over the next 5 years to significantly increase the pace and amount of permanent land protection in the Texas Hill Country. Permanent land protection is needed for key reasons including:

- Preventing suburban sprawl and the excessive consumption of working agricultural and ranch lands and natural lands and wildlife habitat.
- Minimizing the expansion of impermeable surface cover that prevents recharge of Hill Country aquifers and spring waters.
- Slowing and filtering storm water run-off to prevent flooding and deterioration of water quality.
- Preserving the rural character and scenic beauty of the Texas Hill Country that is a vital asset to the regional economy.

The Hill Country faces a perfect storm of pressures on the land—high and increasing rates of land fragmentation, high and 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.

THCCN network participants recognize that some lands should have higher priority for conservation than others regarding the multiple benefits that can accrue from their conservation. THCCN network participants will prioritize focus on land conservation in areas that have: (1) high value for water availability (e.g., lands in important aquifer and spring recharge zones); (2) high value for water quality (e.g., riparian corridors along Hill Country rivers and creeks, sensitive upland areas that are important for watershed health and function); (3) high value for wildlife habitat (e.g., particularly for threatened and endangered species); and (4) high value for adjacency to conserved lands including state and local park lands and other land with public outdoor recreational amenities or potential.

The THCCN network participants appreciate that Texas and the Hill Country have a strong heritage of private land ownership and stewardship, and network participants recognize the importance of advancing market-

oriented solutions that permanently protect private lands from development—such as conservation easements. At the same time, THCCN network participants appreciate the value of having sufficient public park lands to meet community needs and provide important opportunities for access to natural and outdoor recreational activities. THCCN network participants aim to expand efforts to work with both private landowners and Hill Country communities to scale private and public land conservation and stewardship.

Real progress in preserving natural systems—which support healthy fish, wildlife, and plants—in the Hill Country 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.

Organizations participating in the THCCN network will work to:

- Conduct research and analysis to identify priority lands for conservation investment and to understand the benefits of land conservation (including how it contributes to protection of water quality and quantity), building off existing work by The Nature Conservancy, the Meadows Center for Water and Environment, and other partners.
- Regularly convene land trusts 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.
- Seek collaborative opportunities to attract government and philanthropic resources to significantly scale land conservation, including through state and federal funding for conservation easements.
- Advocate for local and county bond initiatives and other programs to support open space preservation and land conservation.
- Showcase progress and benefits from private and public land conservation in the Hill Country.

Measuring Progress: Land Conservation

Potential metrics for tracking progress on Goal 1 include:

- Number of acres protected through conservation easements, purchase of development rights, or direct acquisition (absolute number and number since THCCN launch in 2017)
- Number of conservation easements (absolute number and number since THCCN launch in 2017)
- Number of acres of public park lands (absolute number and number since THCCN launch in 2017)
- Percent of total Hill Country lands in permanent protection

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/>).

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

2022 Targets:

Protect spring and river flows by:

- Doubling the capacity of rainwater capture and use systems in the Hill Country,
- Demonstrating and showcasing the feasibility and benefits of net-zero water low impact development models through at least three projects at scale,
- Helping Hill Country communities reduce municipal per capita water consumption to 140 gallons per day,
- Keeping impervious surface cover to less than 6% of overall land area, and
- Preventing large new groundwater pumping infrastructure projects and/or inter-basin transfers of water in or out of the Hill Country that encourage unsustainable levels of future water demand.

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.

Organizations participating in the THCCN network will work to:

- 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, proposed water development and infrastructure projects and policies that have potential to adversely impact spring and river flows in the Hill Country.

Measuring Progress: Ensuring Spring and River Flows

Potential metrics for tracking progress on Goal 2 include:

- Monitored water flow rates in key springs and rivers across the Hill Country
- Average daily per capita water use (gallons) in counties across the Hill Country
- Capacity of rainwater capture systems permitted, installed, or sold
- Presence and effectiveness rating of watershed councils
- Percent of impermeable surface cover
- Status and assessment of potential impacts of proposed projects or policies

Potential data sources or platforms: USGS maintains data on river and spring flows in Texas through its National Water Information System (<https://waterdata.usgs.gov/tx/nwis/current/?type=flow>). Information on per capita water consumption is available from the Texas Water Development Board's TNRIS system at <https://tnris.org/>; (for example, see <http://www.hillcountryalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Municipal-Water-Use-GPCD-3.pdf>). Scorecards or maps assessing the status and potential impacts of proposed projects or policies can visually convey threats and their status (for example, maps depicting proposed water pipeline projects are useful to convey the status of threats: http://www.hillcountryalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/CarrizoWilcoxPipelines-SAWS-2_11_15.pdf)

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

2022 Targets:

Protect the water quality in Hill Country rivers and creeks from contamination by sewage treatment discharges and run-off by:

- Raising awareness among Hill Country towns, officials, and residents about the benefits of pursuing alternatives to direct discharge of sewage treatment effluent into Hill Country rivers and creeks so as to have no new municipal-scale discharge permits granted,
- Implementing riparian restoration projects along Hill Country rivers and creeks that slow storm water run-off, prevent devastating flooding, and filter contaminants.

As development in the Hill Country increases, pressures on water quality in rivers, creeks, and lakes also grows. 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 storm water 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. These riparian buffers can also help reduce devastating flooding, such as the 2015 Memorial Day flooding along the Blanco River in Wimberley, by slowing down cresting waters.

Organizations participating in the THCCN network will work to:

- 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 storm water 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 landowners regarding riparian restoration benefits and opportunities.

- Support efforts to expand the use of rainwater capture systems that slow run-off and reduce 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.

Measuring Progress: Protecting Water Quality

Potential metrics for tracking progress on Goal 3 include:

- Status of municipal applications for direct discharge to surface waters
- Miles of riparian restoration accomplished in Hill Country
- Surface water quality data

Potential data sources or platforms: Discharge permit applications can be monitored through Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) notices. (for example, see <https://www.tceq.texas.gov/agency/working-with-us/permitting-participation/municipal-wastewater>). Riparian restoration can be monitored by tracking completed projects by different organizations involved in restoration efforts. Surface water quality data can be measured using data available from TCEQ's online Surface Water Quality data systems (see https://www.tceq.texas.gov/waterquality/data-management/swqm_data.html#crp) which includes data from the Texas Clean Rivers Program. The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment also maintains data collected by citizen scientists participating in the Texas Stream Team Program (see <http://www.meadowscenter.txstate.edu/Service/TexasStreamTeam.html>).

PROCESS AND SYSTEMS GOALS

GOAL 4: GROW AWARENESS AND SUPPORT FOR HILL COUNTRY CONSERVATION AMONG THE PUBLIC AND MULTIPLE LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT

Public awareness of and support for conservation is vital to scaling conservation activity in the region. Public

2022 Targets:

Grow public awareness and support for Hill Country conservation by launching a major campaign supporting celebration and protection of Hill Country springs and rivers.

awareness and support can accelerate adoption of private landowner 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. Organizations participating in the THCCN network will work to:

- Develop clearer and more aligned messages and narratives that THCCN network participants can use in their communications activities.
- Develop and implement a coordinated campaign to raise public awareness of and support for the protection of Hill Country springs and rivers (or some other framing of Hill Country conservation).
- Support integration of strategic communications approaches into all the work of conservation-focused organizations in the THCCN. Develop metrics, an annual State of the Hill Country report, and stories highlighting collaborative action on Hill Country issues.
- Cultivate creative partnerships to enhance public awareness, including with the media.

Measuring Progress: Public Awareness

Potential metrics for tracking progress on Goal 4 include:

- Polling results on public perceptions related to Hill Country conservation (including surveys of specific demographic groups)
- Number of articles in local and regional newspapers addressing Hill Country conservation issues
- Number of individual donations to Hill Country conservation organizations.

Potential data sources or platforms: Polls could be periodically commissioned (such as Trust for Public Lands-supported surveys around public support for bond initiatives); some organizations poll members periodically; potential for partnerships with academic institutions and researchers. Hill Country Alliance monitors media coverage on Hill Country issues.

GOAL 5: SCALE UP INVESTMENT IN HILL COUNTRY CONSERVATION

2022 Targets:

Grow philanthropic, public, and private investment in Hill Country conservation by 10-fold.

More resources are needed to scale conservation in the Hill Country. As a private lands state, market-based approaches must be pursued to enable permanent land protection which require resources. Even donated conservation easements require funding to mitigate transaction costs and to fund stewardship activities. In addition, many private landowners and rural 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 is widely viewed as an important ingredient necessary for scaled conservation activity in the region and has two important dimensions. The first dimension relates to the need to dramatically scale public, private, and philanthropic investment flowing to land and water conservation in the region. This could include through local bond initiatives, state-level funding, and/or development of a Hill Country Endowment. The second dimension relates to resources flowing to conservation organizations working in the Hill Country and is an important outcome indicator of the success of the THCCN. Organizations participating in the THCCN network will work to:

- Support efforts to conduct county or local bond measures to invest in open space preservation and land conservation and stewardship.
- Support the development and growth of key conservation funding sources such as the Texas Farm and Ranchland Conservation Program, the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, and the Restoring America's Wildlife Act.
- 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 national funders.
- Explore options for developing a Hill Country Endowment that could attract and manage significantly scaled resources to support Hill Country communities and conservation, capitalized by public and private funding sources.
- Pursue collaborative grant opportunities to secure resources from federal agencies and other entities to support Hill Country conservation and THCCN-proposed collaborative projects.
- Explore 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:

- Aggregated data on investment in Hill Country conservation by type
- Number and amount of individual donations to Hill Country conservation organizations

Potential data sources or platforms: Work to identify major conservation investment sources and maintain spreadsheets to track annual resource flows. THCCN participants could opt to share basic data on the number and amount of individual donations/members, although some data may be sensitive.

GOAL 6: BUILD LONG-TERM PARTNERSHIPS FOR DURABLE CONSERVATION OF THE TEXAS HILL COUNTRY

2022 Targets:

Active stakeholder “tables” are organized and focused on Hill Country conservation; they are coordinating with the THCCN (or THCCN participants) and engage representatives from key constituencies, including businesses, Hill Country local and county officials, I-35 corridor governments, and private landowners, among other groups.

Conservation-focused organizations cannot achieve the necessary scale of impact on their own, even if they are collaborating well through the THCCN and other mechanisms. Long-term success will require building strong and durable partnerships that engage diverse stakeholders in common cause. The THCCN can provide an effective platform for (1) engaging directly 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. The diagram below illustrates some of the types of constituencies and partners that will likely be important for the THCCN to work with to explore opportunities for their engagement and support for Hill Country conservation issues.

Work is needed by THCCN network participants to prioritize and plan for how to best engage with and explore partnership opportunities with key constituencies. As key groups are engaged, there are opportunities to explore stakeholder interest in building larger coalitions or joint campaigns that could help champion and implement scaling of conservation activities. First, it may be useful to explore options for scaling financial mechanisms to support conservation, such as through a Hill Country Rivers Campaign, an “I’m For Hill Country” Campaign, implementation of the Hill Country Endowment concept³, or other approaches that could attract diverse resources to fund conservation activities at scale. Second, there are likely opportunities to work with partners to secure broad commitments to principles for managing resources and development across the Hill Country. Such efforts could be framed as a Hill Country Compact that develops and elevates a strong shared vision for the Hill Country and recognizes some guiding principles that will be important to achieve that vision. Finally, broader partnerships could help strengthen support for longer-term policy progress in addressing complex issues such as groundwater management and development standards.

The THCCN 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 THCCN 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.

³ The University of Texas at Austin Community and Regional Planning Studio. *Toward a Regional Plan for the Texas Hill Country*. January 2016. <http://soa.utexas.edu/publications/toward-regional-plan-texas-hill-country>

Organizations participating in the THCCN network will work to:

- Develop an action plan for further activating and engaging key stakeholder groups and constituencies on Hill Country conservation issues. Support (where appropriate) the establishment and convening of “tables” that provide mechanisms for engaging key stakeholder groups on Hill Country issues.
- Build off current “tables” and convenings supported by HCA and other THCCN participants to expand their reach and impact and to explore closer coordination opportunities with the THCCN organizations.
- Work with key interested stakeholders to develop options and begin implementation of one or more broader campaigns to elevate and accelerate progress on Hill Country conservation issues.

Measuring Progress: Stakeholder Partnerships for the Hill Country

Potential metrics for tracking progress on Goal 6 include:

- Number of stakeholder tables and number and type of stakeholder participants
- Qualitative assessment of progress on Hill Country conservation issues stemming from partnerships

Potential data sources or platforms: Monitoring of tables and partnerships by THCCN participants, such as the Hill Country Alliance.

Network Design and Structure

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR NETWORK DESIGN

Based on review of the literature on design and development of organizational networks and interviews with network design experts, the following principles have been identified to guide the network design, development, and early evolution.

- Focus on clarity of purpose, desired outcomes, and shared values.
- Balance focus on development of structure, infrastructure, and process with focus on early substantive action. Let form and structure evolve to follow function.
- Build a leadership core that enables shared ownership and allow more flexible, organic structure to emerge and evolve around the core.
- Nurture and strengthen existing patterns and paths of communication, coordination, and collaboration. Work to fill high priority gaps identified by network participants.

MEMBERSHIP, GOVERNANCE, AND STRUCTURE

During the early development phase (2017-2018) the THCCN approach to membership will focus on creating a strong core of committed and engaged organizations and institutions to steward and co-own the network's development and to ensure progress in areas identified where shared benefits can be created (that are sufficient to warrant investment of time and resources). This core will be embodied in the THCCN Steering Committee. The Steering Committee may need to accommodate some form of "plus" status to allow for engaged participation by a few close partners (e.g., government institutions) if there are perceived limitations for their being engaged as full and active steering committee members. If the Steering Committee is too large to enable rapid decision-making, there could be an elected or appointed Executive Committee that is charged with making certain decisions or taking certain actions to steward the network (this need may be limited).

The Steering Committee and THCCN activities will be supported by the combination of "secretariat"-supported activities and volunteer actions supported by THCCN participants. It is currently assumed that aspects of the "secretariat" function would largely be assumed by the Hill Country Alliance since they already support some of these services (potentially with some additional support from staff at the Wimberley Valley Watershed Association) and would likely include (provided the availability of staff capacity, approval of the HCA board of directors):

- Maintenance of THCCN contact lists;
- Regular production and dissemination of the *Neighbor-to-Neighbor* email newsletter and/or other regular communications to ensure that network partners are informed of important events, news, and activities relevant to the Hill Country;
- Scheduling and convening of meetings and calls for THCCN Steering Committee, teams, and task forces, as needed;
- Coordination and hosting of the annual Hill Country Leadership Summit (and possible complementary convening activities) to advance implementation of both HCA programs and broader THCCN initiatives.

Network participants from HCA and other organizations will volunteer to support the following types of activities, as interested and appropriate.

- Leadership, facilitation, and implementation support, as appropriate, for specific teams and Task Forces that HCA opts to support (e.g., messaging, metrics);
- Serving as lead applicant on relevant grants and implementing specific projects undertaken by the network or a subset of network participants, where appropriate.

Beyond the Steering Committee+ and secretariat, the network design during this early phase (2017-2018) would be structured to have some standing “tables” or “groups” to allow smaller groups of interested THCCN members to make progress on key activity areas. Anticipated standing THCCN groups include:

- Land conservation and stewardship group.
- Water quality group.
- Public awareness group.
- Water quantity group.
- Partnership building group.
- Investment in conservation group

The THCCN structure will support the emergence of additional “ad hoc tables” or “sub-groups” to advance coordination and collaboration among groups of interested THCN members. These groups will be led by interested THCCN members willing to take on leadership responsibilities for the group (with potential logistics and coordination support from the secretariat, if resources and capacity is available).

Membership beyond the Steering Committee will be allowed to be somewhat porous during this early network phase. Groups are open to consider participation from a range of partners that may help to advance the work; where there are hesitations about opening discussions too broadly, sub-groups can consider alternate approaches for engaging diverse and non-traditional partners and securing their input and involvement.

In the future, it will be useful to consider the advantages and drawbacks associated with “formalizing” aspects of the THCCN membership model. For example, some participants suggested that there could be tiers of membership could be established. Some participants also suggested that it will be important for THCCN participants to have “skin in the game.” At this point, we do not think it makes sense to have membership dues, but to instead focus on raising funds from participants to support specific priority THCCN activities deemed by the Steering Committee to warrant investment in (e.g., such as this strategic planning process).

NETWORK BRANDING AND POSITIONING

During this early phase of the THCCN development the “branding” of the network will be focus on signaling to potential external partners that there is a broad coalition of organizations that is actively working to protect the natural resources and rural character and quality of life in the Hill Country. Branding activities will be designed to attract participation of naturally allied organizations and for purposes of raising the visibility of regional coordination and collaboration among current and potential funders.

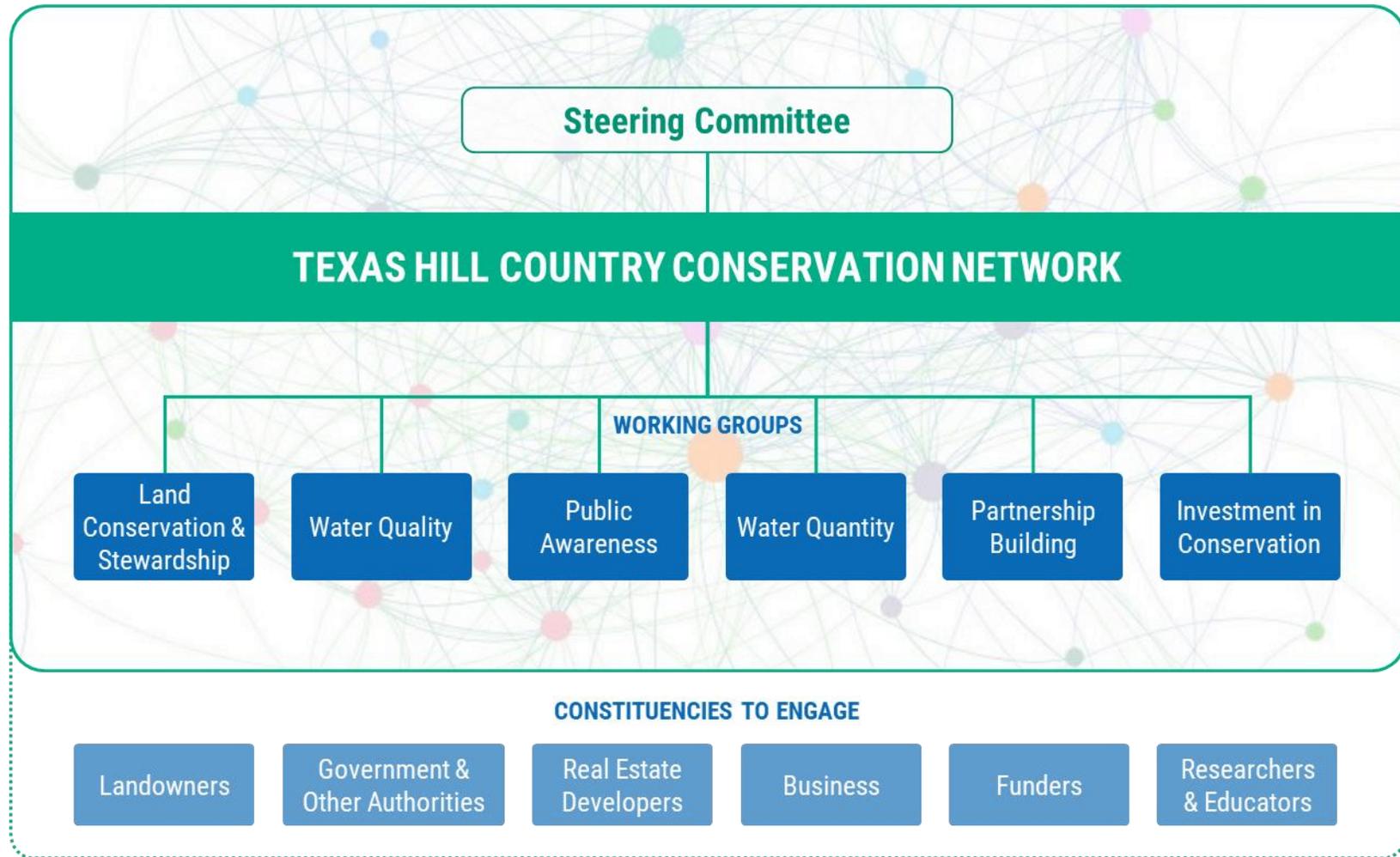
The THCCN will not focus during the early development phase (2017-2018) in taking visible, public-facing stances or endorsements on policy issues or specific development projects, and the network will not take public-facing positions on issues as a network entity. This posturing (while open to discussion by network participants) is designed to prevent early schisms or fraying that may occur from forging visible consensus positions as a network entity – that said, THCCN members will be working hard to find areas of aligned goals and strategies (and even positions) and working as a network, or sub-group of interested network partners, to advance progress towards them. It is also designed to help frame the THCCN as being pro-solutions. It will be important to revisit the THCCN’s approach to branding periodically to determine whether there may be important opportunities to more visibly advance and use the THCN brand in public-facing settings.

NETWORK FUNDRAISING

The THCCN network participants envision three different but related pathways for pursuing fundraising related to the THCCN network, vision, goals, and strategies. These are summarized below.

- **THCCN network coordination:** The THCCN network may seek to raise modest resources to support coordination activities with the network to enable and facilitate collaborative and coordinative discussions, to raise funds for network-identified projects, and to support other needs identified by the THCCN Steering Committee.
- **THCCN collaborative projects:** The THCCN network may seek resources to support projects identified and developed by the network or a subset of network partners. The THCCN Steering Committee can authorize use of the network brand for specific projects.
- **Individual organization fundraising:** The THCCN network recognizes the importance of having strong organizations participating in the network. It also acknowledges the importance of collaborative work to grow overall investments flowing to the field of organizations working on activities and initiatives relevant to Hill Country conservation.

Texas Hill Country Conservation Network Structure



Priority Activities

PHASE 1: EARLY NETWORK DEVELOPMENT (2017-2018)

1. Refine and finalize the THCCN strategic plan

- Refine the vision, mission, and guiding principles.
- Refine the clear core set of desired outcomes (goals) that the THCN is working to achieve/advance together. Identify more specific metrics, targets, and priority activities to support progress towards these goals.
- Refine the draft approach to governance, membership, structure, and operations/secretariat functions, and identify process and timeline for proactively exploring evolution to these approaches over time.
- Identify priority activities being pursued by THCN members related to the core goals/outcomes.

2. Develop 1-2-year action plans for each of the THCCN goals that detail anticipated activities by network participants

- Action plans should include refined targets and priority next steps and actions to advance progress.

3. Develop a first annual State of the Hill Country report with metrics to track progress towards THCCN goals and to support consistent and effective communications

- Identify metrics and targets that can track progress towards network core desired outcomes.
- Identify metrics that can support THCCN participants' efforts to communicate about the state of the Hill Country, trends, stressors, and programs on solution areas.
- Improve data collection and sharing to support metrics tracking over time.

4. Develop a set of clear messages that can be used by THCCN partners to elevate strategic communications in consistent and effective ways

- Identify messages, narratives, and other communications tools to support THCCN and partner communications efforts.

5. Coordinate partner preparations for the 2019 state legislative session and other relevant policy processes

- Continue to support small and large group meetings to learn from the 2017 legislative process.
- Begin planning for upcoming policy processes and explore opportunities for coordination and collaboration.

6. Identify, launch, and support other ad hoc tables to advance action and progress on areas of shared interest

- Specific ideas for sub-group/ad hoc table coordination include:

- Dripping Springs wastewater discharge
- Land conservation financing and bond initiatives
- Groundwater management
- Education/public engagement
- Public/open spaces
- Urban-rural divide
- Houston/Cypress Creek development model to incentivize conservation
- Other

7. Develop a coordinated fundraising strategy and pitch that supports progress on fundraising for individual partners and for THCCN projects

- Develop a clear approach for the fundraising pitch.
- Identify additional opportunities for joint funding proposals.
- Engage with partner funders and support funder coordination to attract new funders and to scale investment in the region.

Attachment 1: THCCN Network Approach and Values

THE THCCN NETWORK APPROACH

The THCCN 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 how organizations and people have successfully worked together to preserve many of the things people love about the Texas Hill Country.
- **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 rural 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 government institutions and their partners to work together** on land and water 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 and networks** such as those including landowners, businesses, farmers and ranchers, rural and urban local and county officials, outdoor and hunting enthusiasts, tourism industry members, state and federal agencies, and many other groups and potential partners.

THCCN 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 that 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 provide input. 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.