

Can We Save Our Hill Country Water for Future Generations?

What got me to thinking about this topic, again, was an article I found in the Cynthia and George Mitchell blog. The article was written by Katherine Romans, the very able and knowledgeable Executive Director of the Hill Country Alliance.

The Hill Country Alliance is arguably the most effective organization we have for bringing together experts in many different fields to talk about and think about how we can manage our water and land to ensure future generations get to see a beautiful, healthy, functioning ecosystem with enough water for the increasing number of future residents.

As individual landowners, it is common for us to say that our goal is to leave the land in as good a shape as we found it—something Aldo Leopold would have said is the “ethical” thing to do. But as time goes by and the population of the Hill Country continues to increase dramatically, accomplishing that goal, collectively, will be harder and harder to do.

The title for Roman’s article is “One Water: The Future of Land and Water in Central Texas.” Romans explains the term “one water” as follows, “It simply means considering all water—whether groundwater, surface water, rainfall, stormwater, drinking water, wastewater,, or even new sources such as air condoning condensate—as part of the complete water balance.”

Romans points out that our modern society tends to take water for granted because we are so used to just turning on the faucet, as opposed to what our predecessors had to do to get water. She says, “It’s easy to appreciate the value of water when you have to carry it, one bucket at a time, from the creek out back. That reminds me of a quote from Benjamin Franklin who said, “We know he worth of water when the well runs dry.”

We all have to learn to appreciate every drop we have and how we could get by with less. Romans reminds us that between one third and one half of our treated municipal drinking water is dumped onto our lawns, golf courses and gardens.

Romans asked the following question, “As we look to add three to five million residents to the 17 counties of the Hill Country by 2050, how will we ensure water quantity and quality to sustain the homes, businesses, and quality of life that defines this region of Texas?” Three of the top ten fastest growing counties in the country are in the Hill Country.

We already have serious problems with companies buying land on which to drill multiple large wells in order to sell the water to far-off municipalities, thus drawing down the aquifer of their neighbors leaving them with no water at all.

New development produces increased impervious cover and additional runoff of polluted water into our streams and rivers. Developers are seeking permits to dump wastewater into ephemeral streams leading to algal blooms, nutrient loading that

destroys the natural aquatic food chain and diminishes water quality making our waterways unswimmable, undrinkable and off-limits for human contact.

Romans concludes with the following: “The adoption of the One Water approach...will require citizens and community members to demand a long-term approach to water planning. It will demand innovation from engineering firms, builders, and designers exploring more non-conventional solutions. It will take the work of city policymakers and water utility managers to invest in infrastructure changes that will have long-term payouts.”

We are fortunate in Kerrville that our city planners several years ago invested in the installation of injection wells allowing the city to store treated water in deep aquifers to be filled in times of abundant rainfall and to be utilized in times of drought. I understand Kerrville was the first municipality in Texas to do so. Similarly, the recent construction of wastewater storage pond allows some water to be used not just once but twice and to thus reduce the draw of river water and the amount of water needing to be treated.

But it will require everyone in the Hill Country to adapt to more innovative ways to conserve water and use less while managing their land to better capture and hold the rainwater we get. It is either that, or the future Hill Country may not be as pleasant a place to live as we know it to be today.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books “Hill Country Ecology,” “Hill Country Landowner’s Guide” and “A Beginner’s Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners.” He can be reached at jstmn@ktc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org .