



TEXAS STATE SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION BOARD

Program News and Activities for March 2016

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The TSSWCB produces this monthly update of the agency's activities as an informational service to local Soil and Water Conservation District Directors. I hope you find this information helpful, and if you have any questions about specific programs or projects please don't hesitate to call your local field representative or our state headquarters.

Rex Isom, Executive Director

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- 1 Upcoming State Board Work Session and Meeting
- 1 Budget and Accounting
- 2 Public Relations & Information
- 3 Texas Nonpoint Source Management Program
- 3 Nonpoint Source Grant Program
- 4 Water Quality Planning and Implementation
- 8 Upcoming Public Meetings
- 8 Water Supply Enhancement Program
- 10 Rio Grande Carrizo Cane Eradication Program
- 11 Texas Invasive Species Coordinating Committee
- 12 Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative
- 14 Interagency Task Force on Economic Growth and Endangered Species

UPCOMING STATE BOARD WORK SESSION AND MEETING

The State Board has tentatively scheduled a Work Session on **Wednesday, May 18, 2016** and a formal State Board Meeting on **Thursday, May 19, 2016 in Temple**. More information is available at <http://www.tsswcb.texas.gov/boardmeetings>, or by contacting Karen Preece at (254) 773-2250, ext. 245 or kpreece@tsswcb.texas.gov

BUDGET AND ACCOUNTING

April 1st is the deadline for submitting Board Member Election Delegate and Alternate Form TSSWCB-43 for Areas II and IV.

May 15th is the deadline for claiming two thirds of Fiscal Year 2016 Matching Fund allocation.

The District Biennial Budget Request for Fiscal Years 2018-19 is scheduled to be available for online submission beginning April 1st. The deadline for submission is scheduled for May 31, 2016.

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND INFORMATION

77th Annual Meeting of Texas Soil and Water Conservation District Directors:

Mark your calendars for October 17-19, 2016 and plan on attending the 77th Annual State Meeting held in Waco.

- Reservations for the meeting will open up Monday, May 2, 2016.
- Reservations may be made at the Hilton Waco or Courtyard By Marriott by calling 1-254-754-8484 or Hilton Reservations at 1-800-774-1500 and stating you are with the Texas Soil & Water Group.
- The Hilton is \$123.00 single/\$133.00 double. The Courtyard is \$119.00 single/\$129.00 double.

Eligible Pay Rates for SWCD Employees

The Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board adopted a proposed rule to amend Chapter 519 concerning Eligible Pay Rates for district Employees. The rule change which will become effective May 1, 2016 increases the maximum TA reimbursement to the State account that is eligible for reimbursement from \$15.00 per hour to \$20.00 per hour not to exceed 40 hours per week.

Leadership Development Training Workshop – 72 SWCD directors, 39 district employees and 10 select NRCS District Conservationists for a total of 126 participants attended the Leadership Development Training Workshop held February 23-24 at the Hilton Garden Inn in Temple, Texas. Workshop attendance surpassed registration expectations.

Wildlife Career Development Events (WAY) – 2016 Regional Contests

Region 1	Unknown	April 12
Region 2	ASU MIR Ctr. San Angelo	April 12
Region 3	Welder Wildlife Inst.-Sinton	April 11
Region 5	Cook Canyon Ranch-Ranger	April 11

Texas FFA and 4-H students have participated or will participate in various scheduled Wildlife Career Development events (contests) during the months of March and April in preparation for the Regional Contests that will be held in April. Scheduled events are:

Wildlife Career Development Events (WAY) Cont-

Houston Livestock Show/Rod.	Houston	March 12
Rolling Plains Wildlife Cont.	Jacksboro	March 16
Cisco College	Cisco	March 22
Gulf Coast	Unknown	March 22
Parker County	Unknown	March 23
West of the Brazos	Columbus	April 1
Guadalupe Valley	Unknown	April 1
FFA Area 7	Unknown	April 1
Cen-Tex	Unknown	April 1
Lingleville	Lingleville	April 2
Clarendon College	Clarendon	April 2
Texas A&M	College Station	April 2
Sul Ross State Univ.	Alpine	April 4
Central Texas	Crooked Creek Ranch	April 4
Ingram	Ingram Shooting Sports Ctr.	April 4
McLennan Co.	McLennan County Com. Col.	April 6
Tarleton State University	Stephenville	April 7
Angelo State University	San Angelo	April 8
James Madison AMP	San Antonio	April 9

2016 Soil Stewardship Public Speaking Contest- Preparation for the State Soil Stewardship Public Speaking Contest begins in April with scheduled FFA district and area events. "Land Stewardship Produces a Healthy Texas" is the theme of the 2016 program. The top three winners at the state level will receive scholarships as follows: First Place winner receives \$3,000. Second Place winner receives \$2,000 and the third place winner receives \$1,000.

Scheduled Soil Stewardship Public Speaking contests, dates and locations are:

FFA Area	Location	Date
Area 7	Unknown	April 1
Area 6	Unknown	April 1
Area 3-District 2	M.O. Cambell Ctr.- Houston	April 12
Area 3- District 3	Bay City	April 14
Area 5- Cross Timbers	Unknown	April 18
Area 3-District 1	Unknown	April 18
Area 9- Piney Woods	Unknown	April 18
Area 8	Lorena	April 18
Area 8- Cen Tex District	Central TX College	April 18
Area 9	Huntington H.S.	April 19
Area 8- Sandy Land District	Cross Roads, TX	April 25
Area 3- District 5	Unknown	April 25
Area 7-Lonestar District	Unknown	April 26
Area 8- Lake Whitney District	Alvarado, TX	April 27
Area 3-District 4	Unknown	April 27
Area 3-District 6	Pearland, TX	April 27
Tarleton State Univ.	Stephenville	May 6
Area 10	Unknown	May 12
Area 8 Convention	Waco	May 14

TEXAS NONPOINT SOURCE MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

The federal Clean Water Act (CWA) requires states to develop a program to protect the quality of water resources from the adverse effects of nonpoint source (NPS) water pollution. The *Texas NPS Management Program* is the State's comprehensive strategy for addressing NPS pollution. The program publication is updated every five years. The most recent revision was submitted by the Governor in June 2012 and thusly approved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The *Texas NPS Management Program* is jointly administered by the TSSWCB and the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ).

Implementation of the *Texas NPS Management Program* involves partnerships among many organizations. With the extent and variety of NPS issues across Texas, cooperation across political boundaries is essential. SWCDs are vital partners in working with landowners to implement best management practices (BMPs) that prevent and abate agricultural and silvicultural NPS water pollution.

More information on the *Texas NPS Management Program* is available at:

<http://www.tsswcb.texas.gov/managementprogram>.

Nonpoint Source Grant Program:

FY2011 – FY2015 CWA §319(h) Grant Status

There are currently 31 on-going §319(h) grant-funded projects addressing a wide array of agricultural and silvicultural NPS issues. Unliquidated federal funds for these on-going projects total approximately \$9.5 million and are primarily being used to implement BMPs to abate NPS pollution from animal feeding operations, grazing livestock operations and row crop operations; provide technical assistance through SWCDs for the development of WQMPs; provide financial incentives for implementing certain BMPs prescribed in WQMPs; support various targeted educational programs; develop and implement Watershed Protection Plans (WPP);

and implement the NPS portion of Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) Implementation Plans (I-Plan).

FY2014 – FY2016 State Grant Status

There are currently 22 on-going projects addressing an array of agricultural and silvicultural NPS issues. Unliquidated state funds for these on-going projects total approximately \$1.7 million and are primarily being used to implement agricultural NPS components of TMDL I-Plans; conduct Recreational Use Attainability Analyses (RUAA); support increased analytical infrastructure at public bacterial source tracking (BST) laboratories; demonstrate innovative BMPs on animal feeding operations and grazing lands; and collect and analyze water quality data for watersheds with impaired waterbodies.

Water Quality Planning and Implementation:

TEXAS GROUNDWATER PROTECTION COMMITTEE

Background

Established by the Texas Legislature in 1989, the Texas Groundwater Protection Committee (TGPC) bridges the gap between State groundwater programs, improves coordination between member agencies, and works to protect groundwater as a vital resource; the TSSWCB is a statutorily-authorized member of the TGPC.

The Texas Water Code sets non-degradation of the State's groundwater resources as the goal for all State programs and asserts that groundwater be kept reasonably free of contaminants that interfere with its present and potential uses. The TGPC implements the State's groundwater protection policy which:

- Requires that pollution discharges, waste disposal and other regulated activities not harm public health or impair current or potential groundwater use;
- Recognizes the variability between aquifers;
- Acknowledges the importance of water quality;
- Balances the protection of the environment and the long-term economic health of the state; and,

- Recognizes the use of the best professional judgment of the responsible state agencies to implement the policy.

The TGPC develops, implements, and updates a comprehensive Texas Groundwater Protection Strategy and an annual Joint Groundwater Monitoring and Contamination Report.

On March 1, 2016, TSSWCB SRM staff [Ashley Wendt] attended a TGPC Public Outreach and Education Subcommittee meeting in Austin. Meeting attendees discussed revisions to be made to several Frequently Asked Questions all regarding Regional Water Planning Groups. A special presentation was given on the Barton Springs salamander.

More information on the TGPC is available at <http://www.tgpc.state.tx.us/>.

Galveston Bay Estuary Program

Galveston Bay is an estuary of national importance and, through the federal CWA §320, is included in the National Estuary Program administered by the EPA. The Galveston Bay Council (GBC) is the stakeholder advisory group that coordinates the implementation of the Galveston Bay Plan, which is a Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan developed under the auspices of the National Estuary Program. The TSSWCB is a named member of the Galveston Bay Council.

On March 3, 2016, TSSWCB SRM staff [Brian Koch] attended a Galveston Bay Council Water and Sediment Quality Subcommittee meeting in Houston. This meeting featured a presentation by Galveston Bay Foundation on the Galveston Bay Action Network, which is a web based system for citizens to report environmental emergencies and complaints. The data is uploaded into the system and the information is given to the entity that has jurisdiction, so they can handle it in an orderly manner. There was also a follow-up from the State of the Bay Symposium in January. The subcommittee also discussed monitoring and research needs, which will be shared with that subcommittee later. There were also updates from WSQ supported projects given at the meeting.

On March 9, 2016, TSSWCB SRM staff [Brian Koch] participated in a Galveston Bay Council Monitoring and Research Subcommittee meeting in Houston. Members from the WSQ subcommittee discussed monitoring and research needs for their subcommittee. They included BST, Interns for Water Quality Monitoring in marinas, BMP effectiveness, and quantifying trash and marine debris in the bay.

More information is available at <http://www.gbep.state.tx.us/>. The implementation of the Galveston Bay Plan affects agricultural and silvicultural operations in watersheds that drain to the Galveston Bay complex in Brazoria, Chambers, Galveston, Harris and Liberty Counties.

Coastal Bend, Bays and Estuaries Program

The 75 miles of estuarine environment along the Texas Coastal Bend, including Aransas Bay, Corpus Christi Bay, Baffin Bay and the Upper Laguna Madre, are of national importance and, through the federal CWA §320, are included in the National Estuary Program administered by the EPA. The Bays Council is the stakeholder advisory group that coordinates the implementation of the Coastal Bend Bays Plan, which is a Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan developed under the auspices of the National Estuary Program. The TSSWCB is a named member of the Water and Sediment Quality Implementation Team.

On February 29, 2016, TSSWCB SRM staff [Brian Koch] attended and Coastal Bend Bays and Estuaries Program (CBBEP) meeting to update the Water and Sediment Quality section of The Bays Plan in Corpus Christi. The CCMP was written in 1996, and USEPA is asking the National Estuary Programs around the nation to update their respective CCMPs.

On March 9, 2016, TSSWCB SRM staff [Brian Koch] attended a CBBEP Water and Sediment Quality Implementation Team meeting in Corpus Christi. This meeting focused on entities describing their projects for FY2017 funding from the estuary program. The projects will be ranked and selected by the team and will go for final approval from the Bays Council in the summer of 2016.

More information is available at <http://www.cbep.org/>. The implementation of the Coastal Bend Bays Plan affects agricultural operations in watersheds that drain to these estuaries in Refugio, Bee, McMullen, Live Oak, Jim Wells, Duval, Brooks, Kenedy, Kleberg, Nueces, San Patricio, and Aransas Counties.

Southeast and South Central Texas Regional Watershed Coordination Steering Committee

The Southeast and South Central Texas Regional Watershed Coordination Steering Committee (WCSC) is composed of about two dozen water quality monitoring and improvement partners, including other state and federal agencies, river authorities, national estuary programs and councils of governments. The WCSC is tasked with providing guidance to TSSWCB SRM staff on watershed planning activities in 47 counties across southeast and south central Texas.

On March 10, 2016, TSSWCB SRM staff [Brian Koch] hosted a WCSC meeting in Columbus. This meeting featured presentations and discussion on Tidal Modeling and Analysis for WPPs. Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) staff presented their strategy for Cedar Bayou WPP, with a background on the project and the purpose of choosing the types of modeling. Houston Advanced Research Center (HARC) staff presented their tidal analysis for the Double Bayou WPP, including background and methodologies used in the project. Roundtable discussion stemmed from both of the presentations.

More information, including meeting materials, is available at <http://www.tsswcb.texas.gov/cwp>.

STATE DISTRICT III

Dickinson Bayou

Impairment: Bacteria, Dissolved Oxygen
Mechanism: WPP, TMDL, I-Plan, UAA
Lead: TCEQ

On March 3, 2016, TSSWCB SRM staff [Brian Koch] attended a Dickinson Bayou Watershed Partnership meeting in Dickinson. This meeting was held to update the partnership on the Bridge Document and the TMDL. The Bridge Document is intended to link the WPP to the TMDL in order to satisfy EPA's nine elements for successful

watershed based plans. TCEQ staff also gave an update on the TMDL.

More information on the bacteria TMDL and the RUAA is available at <http://www.tceq.texas.gov/waterquality/tmdl/80-dickinsonbayoubacteria.html> and more information on the dissolved oxygen TMDL is available at <http://www.tceq.texas.gov/waterquality/tmdl/17-dickinson.html>. More information on the WPP is available at <http://www.dickinsonbayou.org/>. Both the WPP and the TMDLs will affect farming and ranching operations in the Dickinson Bayou watershed in Galveston and Brazoria Counties.

Mill Creek

Impairment: Bacteria
Mechanism: WPP
Lead: TSSWCB
Project: "Data Collection and Development of Essential Components for the Mill Creek Watershed Protection Plan" Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service; State \$299,955
Project: "Development of a Watershed Protection Plan for Mill Creek" Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service; State \$208,542

On February 29, 2016, TSSWCB SRM Staff [Jana Lloyd, Brian Koch] attended the Mill Creek Partnership meeting in Bleiberville. The meeting focused on a recap of all efforts in 2015 that lead to the EPA review and acceptance of the Mill Creek Watershed Protection Plan. An update on FY2016 proposals that were submitted to TSSWCB for funding was presented to the stakeholders as well as next steps for the partnership.

More information is available at <http://millcreek.tamu.edu/>. This WPP affects livestock and farming operations in the Mill Creek watershed in Austin and Washington Counties.

STATE DISTRICT IV

Double Bayou

Impairment: Bacteria, Dissolved Oxygen
Mechanism: WPP
Lead: TSSWCB

Project: "Development of a Watershed Protection Plan for Double Bayou", Houston Advanced Research Center; Federal \$1,023,614/ External \$388,149

On January 19, 2016, TSSWCB SRM staff [Brian Koch] attended a Double Bayou Watershed Partnership meeting in Double Bayou. This meeting was held to get stakeholder approval to send to WPP out for public comment, which is one of the final stages before the plan gets sent to EPA for consistency review. There was also an update on feral hog management activities and a path forward for implementation of the WPP.

More information is available at <http://www.tsswcb.texas.gov/watersheds#doublebayou>. This WPP has the potential to affect agricultural operations in the Double Bayou watershed in Chambers and Liberty Counties.

Navasota River

Impairment: Bacteria
Mechanism: Assessment
Lead: TSSWCB
Project: "Watershed Protection Plan Development for the Navasota River below Lake Limestone", Texas Water Resources Institute; State \$210,532

On February 18, 2016, TSSWCB SRM staff [Ashley Wendt, Brian Koch] attended Navasota River WPP meetings in College Station and Franklin, respectively. At these meetings discussion centered upon bacteria source estimates, loading and needed reductions. Stakeholder organization and the decision making process was also finalized at these two meetings. Feedback provided at the meetings will allow further refinement of the WPP process. The next set of meetings is scheduled for June 2016.

More information is available at <http://navasota.tamu.edu/> or <https://www.tsswcb.texas.gov/en/managementprogram/navasota>. This project affects livestock operations in the Navasota River watershed in Brazos, Grimes, Madison, Leon, Limestone and Robertson Counties.

Lampasas River

Impairment: Bacteria, Dissolved Oxygen
Mechanism: WPP
Lead: TSSWCB
Project: "Surface Water Quality Monitoring to Support the Implementation of the Lampasas River Watershed Protection Plan", Texas A&M AgriLife Research; Federal \$206,169/External \$166,616
Project: "Continued Coordinating Implementation of the Lampasas River Watershed Protection Plan", Texas A&M AgriLife Research; Federal \$312,655/ External \$223,701

On February 25, 2016, TSSWCB SRM staff [Wesley Gibson] attended a public meeting for the Lampasas River Watershed in Lampasas. The watershed coordinator provided updates on efforts to implement management measures identified in the Lampasas River WPP. Other discussion focused on external grants including money for feral hog abatement and the availability of financial assistance to landowners for Water Quality Management Plans. Also, the Hill Country SWCD District Technician was introduced and gave an overview on the resources available through the SWCD.

More information is available at <http://www.lampasasriver.org/>. This WPP affects livestock operations in the Lampasas River watershed in Bell, Burnet, Hamilton, Lampasas and Mills Counties.

STATEWIDE PROJECTS (NOT WATERSHED-SPECIFIC)

Project: "Continued Statewide Delivery of the Texas Watershed Steward Program", Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service; Federal \$417,398/ External \$72,033

A Texas Watershed Steward workshop was held in Arlington on March 10, 2016. Over forty people attended the workshop that was sponsored by the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service and TSSWCB. The training included an overview of water quality and watershed management in

Texas as well as current efforts to help improve and protect the Lake Arlington and Village Creek Watershed. Attendees also learned about community-driven watershed protection and management. More information on the Texas Watershed Steward Program is available at <http://twsw.tamu.edu/>.

Project: "Statewide Delivery of Riparian and Stream Ecosystem Education Program", Texas Water Resources Institute/Texas A&M Institute of Renewable Natural Resources; Federal \$317,486/ External \$207,973

On March 3, 2016, TSSWCB staff [Wesley Gibson] attended a Riparian and Stream Ecosystem workshop was held in Lampasas. Over 40 people attended the workshop that was sponsored by the Texas Water Resource Institute and TSSWCB, in coordination with the Blackland Research and Extension Center and Lampasas County AgriLife Extension service. The training focused on water quality issues relating to the Lampasas River Watershed, including the key riparian areas plays to help improve and protect water in the area. Topics covered included: the definition of a watershed and riparian area, riparian vegetation ratings, how to photo monitor, and local resources for landowners. The training also involved a field tour of a local riparian area on the Lampasas River and a chance to see a recovering riparian area and evaluate the vegetation within it. More information on the Riparian and Stream ecosystem educational program, please visit <http://twri.tamu.edu/>.

Project: "Statewide Delivery of the Beef Cattle, Dairy Cattle, Poultry and Horse Components of the Lone Star Healthy Streams Program", Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service; Federal \$370,941/ External \$247,324

On March 4, 2016, TSSWCB SRM staff [Wesley Gibson] attended a Lone Star Healthy Streams workshop in Hempstead. The workshop included an overview of water quality law and policy, sources of bacteria in Texas waterways, bacteria fate and transport, benefits of voluntary

conservation practices, sources of financial and technical assistance, and livestock-specific BMPs that are designed to reduce bacterial contamination of runoff. For more information, visit <http://lshs.tamu.edu/>.

Project: "Enhancing Feral Hog Management Through Statewide Implementation of Lone Star Healthy Streams", Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service; Federal \$558,010/External \$376,973

On March 5, 2016, TSSWCB SRM staff [Brian Koch] attended and presented at a Feral Hog Workshop in Angleton. There were 60 attendees at the workshop that was sponsored by Texas A&M AgriLife Extension and TSSWCB. The workshops provided participants with information about the basic biology of feral hogs and their damage in watersheds, population dynamics, and laws and regulations regarding feral hogs. Brian Koch presented on Water Quality in Southeast Texas, including information on WPPs, TMDLs, surface water quality monitoring and water quality impairments. Also, participants learned about agricultural regulations regarding feral hogs, disease concerns and feral hog control. More information about the Lone Star Healthy Streams Feral Hog Component is available at <http://lshs.tamu.edu/>.

WATER SUPPLY ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM

Meeting Critical Water Conservation Needs and Enhancing Public Water Supplies Through Brush Control

Scarcity and competition for water have made sound water planning and management increasingly important. The demand for water in Texas is expected to increase by about 22%, to a demand of nearly 22 million ac-ft in 2060; while existing water supplies are projected to decrease by about 10%, to just over 15 million ac-ft.

Noxious brush, detrimental to water conservation, has invaded millions of acres of rangeland and riparian areas in Texas, reducing or eliminating

Upcoming Public Meetings:

- April 1, 2016 – San Antonio River Authority (SARA) Environmental Advisory Committee CRP Meeting (Karnes City)
- April 4, 2016 – White Oak RUAA Meeting (Sulphur Springs)
- April 5, 2016 – White Oak RUAA Meeting (Mt. Pleasant)
- April 5, 2016 – GBC Budget and Priorities Subcommittee Meeting (Houston)
- April 11, 2016 – South Lilly RUAA Meeting (Pittsburg)
- April 12, 2016 – SARA CRP CMM (San Antonio)
- April 13, 2016 – Texas Well Owner Network, Middle Yegua (Lincoln)
- April 13-14, 2016 – Texas Bays and Estuaries Meeting (Port Aransas)
- April 14, 2016 – Brazos River Authority CRP SCM (Waco)
- April 20, 2016 – TGPC Meeting (Austin)
- April 21-23, 2016 – Texas Pollinator Powwow (Lubbock)
- April 21, 2016 – Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) CRP Water Quality Advisory Meeting (Austin)
- April 27, 2016 – Texas Well Owner Network, Brazos River (Rosenberg)
- April 29, 2016 – LCRA Creekside Workshop (Johnson City)
- April 29, 2016 – Sabine River Authority CRP Meeting (Orange)

WATER SUPPLY ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM

Cont-

stream flow and aquifer recharge through interception of rainfall and increased evapotranspiration. Brush control has the potential to enhance water yield by conserving water lost to evapotranspiration, improve soil health, restore native wildlife habitat, improve livestock grazing distribution, protect water quality, reduce hazardous fuels to mitigate wildfire, and manage invasive species.

In order to help meet the State's critical water conservation needs and ensure availability of water supplies, the Texas Legislature established the Water Supply Enhancement Program (WSEP) administered by the TSSWCB to increase available surface and ground water supplies through the targeted control of brush species that are detrimental to water conservation (e.g., juniper, mesquite, saltcedar). The 84th Texas Legislature continued funding for the WSEP by providing \$2,638,413 to the TSSWCB for FY2016.

The TSSWCB collaborates with SWCDs, and other local, regional, state, and federal agencies to identify watersheds across the state where it is feasible to implement brush control in order to enhance public water supplies. The TSSWCB uses a competitive grant process to rank feasible projects and allocate WSEP grant funds, giving priority to projects that balance the most critical water conservation need of municipal water user groups with the highest projected water yield from brush control.

In watersheds where WSEP grant funds have been allocated, the TSSWCB works through SWCDs to deliver technical assistance to landowners in order to implement brush control activities for water supply enhancement. A 10-year resource management plan is developed for each property enrolled in the WSEP which describes the brush control activities to be implemented, follow-up treatment requirements, brush density to be maintained after treatment, and supporting practices to be implemented including livestock grazing management, wildlife habitat management, and erosion control measures. Cost-share assistance is provided through the WSEP to landowners implementing brush control activities on eligible acres.

Recent Activities

WSEP staff assisted SWCD Directors with WSEP issues at board meetings for the Kendall SWCD #216, Kerr County SWCD #217, and Pedernales SWCD #218.

WSEP staff assisted Conservation Planners and worked with landowners in several project watersheds to develop cost-share contracts for FY2016 funds and conduct performance certifications on completed brush control activities.

The *WSEP 2015 Annual Report* was developed, published, and distributed. During FY2015, through the WSEP, 23,191 ac of brush management was incentivized by the State in 11 project areas. For these acres, landowners received cost-share assistance through the program (contracts from FY2013, FY2014, and FY2015) totaling \$1,279,326 in state funding. Based on estimates provided by feasibility studies

and computer models, and depending on the climatic conditions across the state that influence the sequence of drought and rainfall events, this work is projected to enhance water yield by 5,928.7 ac-ft/yr. The *Annual Report* is available at: <http://www.tsswcb.texas.gov/reports#wsep>.

On January 31-February 4, 2016, WSEP staff attended the 69th Annual Society for Range Management Meeting in Corpus Christi. The theme of this year's conference *Rangelands and Wildlife* provided an overarching view of the changing landscape of Texas rangelands. Several sessions focused on brush encroachment and management, rangeland ecohydrology, endangered species, invasive species, and prescribed burning. Staff discussed WSEP activities and accomplishments with rangeland management leaders from across Texas and the nation. More information on this conference is available at <http://www.rangelands.org/>.

On January 28-29, 2016, TSSWCB staff attended the Golden-cheeked Warbler and Black-capped Vireo Symposium in Austin. The goal of the symposium was to facilitate dialogue and discussion regarding the latest research, management, and conservation efforts pertaining to the golden-cheeked warbler and black-capped vireo. Many WSEP priority watersheds in the Hill Country contain habitat for these two endangered species. More information on this symposium is available at <http://biodiversityworks.org/our-work/2016-golden-cheeked-warbler-and-black-capped-vireo-symposium/>.

On February 2, 2016, TSSWCB staff attended a project update meeting in Victoria to discuss progress to collect data on the effects of huisache removal on evapotranspiration in south central Texas. This 5-year study is funded in part by the TSSWCB with WSEP grant funds. Research will be conducted by the U.S. Geological Survey on over 300 acres of native rangeland on the McFaddin Ranch in southern Victoria County. Other project cooperators include USDA-NRCS, San Antonio River Authority, Victoria County Groundwater Conservation District, Victoria SWCD #346, and the Desert Research Institute. More information on this project is available at <http://tx.usgs.gov/projects/Huisache/>.

TSSWCB staff is working with the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association on an article on the WSEP and research on brush management and water yield for the May 2016 "water" issue of *The Cattleman*.

WSEP staff has worked with Texas Section Society for Range Management (TSSRM) staff on plans for the TSSRM's Annual Meeting to be held in October 2016 in Uvalde. A presentation on the WSEP and research on brush management and water yield is being planned for the Annual Meeting.

On March 3, 2016, the Texas Water Development Board (TWDB) authorized the publication of the draft *2017 State Water Plan* for public comment. The public comment period extends through April 25, 2016. A public hearing is scheduled for April 18, 2016 in Austin to receive oral comment on the draft *Plan*. WSEP staff is reviewing the draft *2017 State Water Plan* and the 16 approved *Regional Water Plans* to ascertain how each Regional Water Planning Group addressed brush control for water supply enhancement. Additional information on the draft *2017 State Water Plan* is available at <http://www.twdb.texas.gov/waterplanning/swp/2017/index.asp>.

TSSWCB staff is working with TWDB staff to develop the report *An Assessment of Water Conservation in Texas – Report to the 85th Legislature* as a supplement to the *2017 State Water Plan*. The joint report is required by Water Code §16.022 and must include, among other topics:

- information on existing water conservation efforts by the TSSWCB;
- an analysis of programmatic approaches and funding for additional water conservation efforts; and
- an assessment of existing statutory authority and whether changes are needed to more effectively promote and fund water conservation projects.

A WSEP Science Advisory Committee meeting is scheduled for April 27, 2016 in Austin. TSSWCB staff assembled this committee to assist in implementing statutory changes to the WSEP.

More information on the WSEP is available at: <http://www.tsswcb.texas.gov/brushcontrol>.

RIO GRANDE CARRIZO CANE ERADICATION PROGRAM

Improving Border Security and Restoring Ecosystem Function of the Rio Grande through Invasive Species Control

Large dense stands of invasive, non-native carrizo cane (*Arundo donax*) now occupy the banks and floodplains of the Rio Grande, thwarting law enforcement efforts along the international border, impeding and concealing the detection of criminal activity, restricting law enforcement officers' access to riverbanks, and impairing the ecological function and biodiversity of the Rio Grande.

In order to help meet the Governor's border security priorities, the Texas Legislature, in 2015, directed the TSSWCB, through SB1734, to develop and implement a program to eradicate carrizo cane along the Rio Grande.

Carrizo cane is considered one of the greatest threats to the health of riparian ecosystems in the southwestern United States, with great negative impact to biodiversity and ecological processes. *Arundo* does not provide any food sources or nesting habitats for native wildlife. As a result of this weed's high evapotranspiration capacity, infestations threaten water supplies for agricultural and municipal drinking water uses in south Texas.

The TSSWCB must develop a Rio Grande Carrizo Cane Eradication Program (RGCCEP) that establishes long-term management of carrizo cane at a landscape scale along the entire Rio Grande, an international border with great ecological and cultural significance. Comprehensively addressing the impacts of arundo on border security are paramount to the program, while also accruing benefits to the ecosystem health of the Rio Grande and water user groups in South Texas.

Due to the diversity of biological, legal, and cultural issues associated with control of carrizo

cane along the 1,255-mile Rio Grande international border, the TSSWCB envisions an ecosystem-based approach that will integrate the use of biological, chemical, mechanical, and cultural controls, as appropriate, to manage carrizo cane along the Rio Grande. Such an approach will necessitate a long-term maintenance program to ensure eradication is successful. Participation in the program will be voluntary for landowners.

TSSWCB is currently in the early stages of developing the RGCCEP. This process will involve affected landowners, municipalities, other state and federal governmental entities, and concerned citizens. The agency is in the “public scoping” stage of soliciting input from the public and affected stakeholders into how this program should be developed and implemented.

Recent Activities

TSSWCB staff is working with staff from the USDA-NRCS Kika de la Garza Plant Materials Center in Kingsville to develop lists of native plants that can be used for restoration along the Rio Grande after control of carrizo cane.

TSSWCB staff collaborated with USDA Agricultural Research Service staff on the “Areawide IPM of *Arundo donax*” proposal. This multi-agency collaborative proposal for USDA federal funds would, among other project tasks, provide support for technical assistance to develop conservation plans focused on control of carrizo cane in Starr County.

On March 8, 2016, TSSWCB staff attended the Texas Invasive Species Coordinating Committee meeting in Huntsville to discuss details of the proposed RGCCEP.

On March 9-10, 2016, TSSWCB staff attended the 6th Texas Invasive Plant and Pest Conference in Huntsville at Sam Houston State University. The conference included keynotes, concurrent sessions, workshops, field trips, posters, and symposia designed to serve scientists, land managers, state and federal agencies, local governments, and other professionals with an interest in managing Texas’ invasive species. The conference was co-hosted by the Texas Invasive

Plant and Pest Council and the Texas Invasive Species Institute (a unit of the Texas State University System). A presentation on the RGCCEP was given by TSSWCB staff at the meeting. More information on the conference is available at

<http://texasinvasives.org/professionals/conference.php>.

On March 14-15, 2016, along with the Association of Texas SWCDs, TSSWCB staff met with numerous members of the Texas Congressional Delegation in Washington, DC to discuss federal funding for carrizo cane removal along the Rio Grande.

Several newspaper opinion-editorials, radio stories, and television stories have recently been run regarding the RGCCEP. Stories have run on the *Texas Standard* KUT 90.5 (National Public Radio affiliate in Austin), KGNS-TV 8 (NBC affiliate in Laredo), KRGV-TV 5 (ABC affiliate in Weslaco), the *Austin American-Statesman*, and the *San Antonio Express-News*

More information on the RGCCEP is available at: <http://www.tsswcb.texas.gov/arundo>.

TEXAS INVASIVE SPECIES COORDINATING COMMITTEE

The Texas Invasive Species Coordinating Committee (TISCC) was established by the 81st Texas Legislature in 2009 (Senate Bill 691) and administratively attached to the TSSWCB. The member agencies of the TISCC are the Texas Department of Agriculture, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), the TSSWCB, the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, the Texas A&M Forest Service, and the Texas Water Development Board.

The TISCC provides a forum for developing interagency strategies and policies for invasive species control. Its member agencies cooperate through an orderly exchange of information, jointly held meetings, and the appointment of sub-committees and working groups in order to facilitate development of effective and timely state responses to invasive species and to make

recommendations to the leadership of state departments and agencies regarding research, technology transfer, and management actions related to invasive species control.

Many of TSSWCB's programs support the State's invasive species management goals and contribute to achieving the goals and objectives of the TISCC.

Recent Activities

On March 8, 2016, the TISCC met in Huntsville to discuss current issues related to invasive species control. The meeting was held in conjunction with the 6th Texas Invasive Plant and Pest Conference being held at Sam Houston State University. The TISCC elected Monica McGarrity (TPWD) as Vice Chairman for the remainder of the year. TPWD staff spoke about increased state funding for aquatic invasive species management. Sam Houston State University staff spoke about the research activities of the Texas Invasive Species Institute, a unit of the Texas State University System. TPWD staff spoke about how the Northeast Texas Conservation Delivery Network is partnering with Working Dogs for Conservation to detect invasive species. Bayou Preservation Association staff spoke about exotic plant eradication methods using volunteer and inmate labor in Houston area waterways. Texas A&M Forest Service staff spoke about Brazilian Peppertree management in Port Aransas conducted by the Texas Gulf Region Cooperative Weed Management Area.

On March 9-10, 2016, TSSWCB staff attended the 6th Texas Invasive Plant and Pest Conference in Huntsville at Sam Houston State University. The conference included keynotes, concurrent sessions, workshops, field trips, posters, and symposia designed to serve scientists, land managers, state and federal agencies, local governments, and other professionals with an interest in managing Texas' invasive species. The conference was co-hosted by the Texas Invasive Plant and Pest Council and the Texas Invasive Species Institute (a unit of the Texas State University System). A presentation on the Rio Grande Carrizo Cane Eradication Program was given by TSSWCB staff at the meeting. More information on the conference is available at

<http://texasinvasives.org/professionals/conference.php>.

National Invasive Species Awareness Week was February 21-27, 2016. More information is available at <http://www.nisaw.org/>.

On January 21, 2016, the Texas Wildlife Association hosted a webinar on *Development of Toxicants and Delivery Systems for Feral Swine*. An archive of the webcast is available at <http://www.texas-wildlife.org/webinars/toxicants-and-delivery-system-for-feral-swine>.

For information about invasive, non-native carrizo cane (*Arundo donax*), see the section Rio Grande Carrizo Cane Eradication Program.

More information regarding the TISCC is available at <http://www.tiscc.texas.gov/>.

LESSER PRAIRIE-CHICKEN INITIATIVE

The lesser prairie-chicken (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*) is an upland, grassland-nesting bird found in mixed grass, sand-sage, and shinnery oak prairies of the northeastern Texas Panhandle, the southwestern Texas South Plains, and portions of Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. Due to the loss of native prairie, as well as, fragmented and degraded habitat, populations of the bird have declined significantly, leading the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), on April 10, 2014, to list the bird as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). However, on September 1, 2015, U.S. District Judge Robert Junell (Western District of Texas, Midland) ruled that the USFWS failed to take into consideration the on-going state conservation efforts before listing the lesser prairie-chicken as threatened under the ESA and granted summary judgment vacating the USFWS's listing decision.

As a result, USDA-NRCS expanded its conservation efforts and established the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative (LPCI). USDA-NRCS provides technical assistance and financial incentives for agricultural producers to voluntarily implement conservation practices that promote

healthy grazinglands and benefit the lesser prairie-chicken and other wildlife through the LPCI. Ranchers and farmers use the assistance provided through LPCI to implement grazing management systems, remove invasive plants, plant grasses and shrubs suitable for rangeland, and plant buffers to reduce soil erosion and improve water quality. In most cases, practices that are good for the bird are good for ranching and can lead to improved rangeland health.

Agricultural producers with land in the lesser prairie-chicken range can gain regulatory predictability if they work with USDA-NRCS to voluntarily undertake conservation activities that benefit the bird's population and habitat. An agreement between USDA and USFWS states that ranchers and farmers can receive regulatory assurances from USFWS for up to 30 years for carrying out these voluntary conservation activities regardless of the regulatory status of the bird.

TSSWCB and USDA-NRCS are working together through the LPCI in an effort to accelerate the development of conservation plans and adoption of conservation practices in the lesser prairie-chicken range through technical assistance provided to agricultural producers. USDA-NRCS, in a Working Lands for Wildlife matching agreement with TSSWCB, has established funding opportunities for SWCDs to provide conservation planning assistance to landowners in the lesser prairie-chicken range.

Recent Activities

On February 29, 2016, U.S. District Judge Robert Junell rejected the USFWS's request to reinstate federal protections for the lesser prairie-chicken. It leaves intact Junell's decision from September 2015 that removed the bird from the threatened species list and threw into question how the government considers voluntary conservation measures when issuing listing decisions under the ESA. Federal attorneys had asked Junell to amend his 2015 ruling, which found that USFWS failed to adequately weigh a rangewide conservation plan that encourages landowners to protect prairie-chicken habitat through mitigation and land conservation. He found that the USFWS should not be given another chance to list the bird

because the analysis behind its original decision "was insufficient and its reasoning was invalid because material information was not considered in reaching the decision" to list the lesser prairie-chicken. Junell was not swayed by Administration claims that delisting the bird has had and will continue to have disruptive effects. "The evidence provided by USFWS is speculative and USFWS has not persuaded the Court that those development activities that have already occurred or that may occur are imminent or substantial," he wrote. The judge also said that because USFWS based its listing decision on the population of lesser prairie-chickens across the bird's five-state range, it should be vacated across the same range.

Throughout 2015, the LPCI produced a range of outreach materials for landowners, resource managers, and the general public. A recently released new one-page fact sheet, LPCI Resources Toolkit, now compiles this information and provides quick direct links to all of the Initiative's main publications, website and social media, videos, photo gallery, and more. The fact sheet is available on the LPCI website at <http://lpcinitiative.org/>.

Aerial surveys of lesser prairie-chicken populations will begin March 17, 2016 and run through mid-May in the bird's five-state range. The surveys are conducted annually by the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) to ascertain population trends and how the bird is responding to management strategies. WAFWA has established a consistent methodology for these aerial surveys which allows the most accurate information possible to be collected. The surveys will be conducted by helicopter in locations chosen randomly within the lesser prairie-chicken range, which is part of the methodology strategy. In previous years, some of the fly paths prompted calls, which is why WAFWA is getting the word out about the start of aerial survey work. Results from this year's surveys will be available on July 1. Despite last year's encouraging news, the population is still low compared to historical numbers. More information on the aerial surveys is available on the WAFWA website at <http://www.wafwa.org/>.

More information on the LPCI is available at <http://www.tsswcb.texas.gov/infoed/lpci>.

INTERAGENCY TASK FORCE ON ECONOMIC GROWTH AND ENDANGERED SPECIES

The Interagency Task Force on Economic Growth and Endangered Species (Task Force) was established by the 81st Texas Legislature in 2009 (Senate Bill 2534). The Task Force is composed of the Comptroller, the Commissioner of Agriculture, the Executive Director of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, the Executive Director of the Texas Department of Transportation, and the Executive Director of the TSSWCB.

The purpose of the Task Force is to establish a mechanism for state agencies to provide policy and technical assistance regarding compliance with endangered species laws and regulations to local and regional governmental entities and their communities engaged in economic development activities so that compliance with endangered species laws and regulations is as effective and cost-efficient as possible.

The TSSWCB contributes to the Task Force's objectives by improving coordination between local SWCDs and other partners on endangered species laws and regional economic development interests.

Recent Activities

On March 9, 2016, the Task Force met in Austin. The Task Force discussed updates on species of interest including the dunes sagebrush lizard and the Louisiana pine snake; Work Group activities on the Sprague's pipit, freshwater mussels, spot-tailed earless lizard, and Monarch butterfly; and economic studies of freshwater mussels. The Task Force also heard presentations from member agencies on Monarch butterfly activities. The Task Force discussed recent federal regulatory and policy actions regarding the Endangered Species Act (ESA) by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), including a proposed rule on endangered and threatened wildlife and plants and revisions to the regulations

for petitions, the draft methodology for prioritizing status reviews and petitions for listing, the revised interagency cooperative policy regarding the role of state agencies in ESA activities, and changes to rules regarding critical habitat designations.

On March 16, 2016, the Task Force held a Work Group meeting in Austin on Freshwater Mussels to review efforts underway to gain better data on the status and distribution of these species.

On March 15, 2016, the USFWS announced their findings on 29 petitions to list, delist, or reclassify species under the ESA. Of those, the species with ranges in Texas are:

- not-substantial petition findings – no further status review (USFWS will take no further action on these petitions)
 - Navasota ladies-tresses – delist petition
 - Reticulate collared lizard
 - Southern dusky salamander
- substantial petition findings – status review initiated (1st step in process for USFWS to make a determination)
 - American burying beetle – delist petition
 - Leoncita false-foxglove
 - Rio Grande chub

To ensure that the status reviews are comprehensive, the USFWS is requesting scientific and commercial data and other information regarding the species for the substantial findings. Based on the status reviews, USFWS will issue findings on the petitions that address whether the petitioned action is warranted. The notice for all 29 findings is available in the *Federal Register* at <https://www.federalregister.gov/public-inspection>. With this announcement, the USFWS is opening a 60-day public comment period for the substantial findings. More information on the ESA listing process is available at <http://www.fws.gov/endangered/>.

The TSSWCB is working in cooperation with 143 SWCDs to enhance or restore Monarch butterfly habitat by planting pollinator-friendly plant species on over 1,600 acres on rural lands and by installing Monarch butterfly gardens in public areas. Funding for this project is provided by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the

USDA-NRCS. Beginning in May 2016, funding for habitat enhancement/restoration on 1 to 30 acre plots will be available to ranchers, farmers, or private landowners. In addition, funding for butterfly gardens will be made available to entities such as schools, businesses, or municipalities. More information is available at <http://www.tsswcb.texas.gov/monarch>.

For information about the lesser prairie-chicken, see the section Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative.

More information regarding the Task Force is available at http://keepingtexasfirst.org/task_force/.

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Established in 1939, the TSSWCB administers Texas' soil and water conservation law and delivers coordinated natural resource conservation programs to agricultural producers through the State's 216 individual SWCDs. The agency is governed by a seven-member State Board composed of two Governor appointees and five individuals elected from across Texas by 1,080 Directors of local SWCDs. The TSSWCB is the lead state agency for planning, implementing, and managing programs for preventing and abating agricultural and silvicultural (forestry) nonpoint sources of water pollution; administers a water supply enhancement program through the targeted control of brush species in areas in need of water conservation; provides operation, maintenance, and structural repair grant funds to local government sponsors of the State's network of 2,000 flood control dams; and facilitates the Texas Invasive Species Coordinating Committee.