

# **2015 Texas Forests and Drinking Water Forum**

## **Final report**

### **December 2015**

On November 17 and 18, 2015, 49 stakeholders from the Texas forest and drinking water sectors (Appendix A) convened at La Torretta Lake Resort and Spa in Montgomery at the first-ever Texas Forests and Drinking Water Forum to explore the connections between forests and drinking water, and to brainstorm ways to work together to continue to sustain these two very important and interdependent resources (see Appendix B for Forum background and planning information).

The Texas Forests and Drinking Water Forum was convened with the knowledge that forests and drinking water are strongly connected and dependent on each other. Southeastern forests that are actively managed can help protect and enhance drinking water supplies while also providing economic benefits. The Texas Forests and Drinking Water Forum was intended to begin a collaborative relationship between the forest and drinking water sectors, and to think creatively about how to help ensure the viability of both sectors. The Forum's key goals and objectives were to discuss:

- Issues and challenges facing the forest and drinking water sectors
- How to enhance communication and develop relationships between the sectors
- Options for managing forested watersheds for both sustainable drinking water and forest products

Many Forum participants gathered for a networking social the night before the Forum. The purpose of this gathering was to introduce participants to each other, begin informal collaborative discussions, and foster a collegial atmosphere.

The Forum's morning program included a welcome and introduction from Tom Boggus, Director, Texas A&M Forest Service, and Lara Zent, Interim Executive Director, Texas Rural Water Association, who encouraged participants to build strong relationships by building trust and understanding. The introduction was followed by presentations on the drinking water and forest sectors, watershed protection case studies, forestry-drinking water collaboration examples, and funding sources (see Appendix C for Forum program). The afternoon was devoted to a facilitated group discussion focused on key issues and interest areas raised in the registration survey (see Appendix D for survey response summary) and during the morning sessions.

### **Brief Summary of Immediate Forum Follow-Up Actions**

- Update the map of priority watersheds and circulate to the group with the intent of finding a couple watersheds where all the actions described above could be considered (*Person responsible: Hughes Simpson; Timeframe: next four months*)
- Investigate the SWIFT program to evaluate possible collaboration opportunities (*Person responsible: Justin Bower and Hughes Simpson; Timeframe: next two months*)
- Reconvene Forum participants and others review progress and discuss potential collaborative projects and funding (*Person responsible: Kitty Weisman and Hughes Simpson with Forum Planning Team; Timeframe: In six months*)

### **Forum Discussion, Ideas, and Next Steps**

Forum participants demonstrated strong passion and commitment to the Forum's key objectives and a willingness to listen to each other. The morning sessions identified the unique issues and challenges of the forest and drinking water sectors, as well as the rigorous standards that each sector follows. During the afternoon discussion, participants identified several follow up steps to build a successful Texas forest and drinking water collaborative partnership, and agreed that this initial gathering and effort has the potential to gain momentum.

Forum participants identified next steps and the follow-up tasks below, and agreed to meet again in six months to focus on identifying priority watersheds for collaborative forestry-drinking water pilot projects. One over-arching message from the group is to keep any follow-up simple and achievable to keep momentum strong and help see results quickly.

### **Drinking water utility needs and ideas:**

- East Cedar Creek Freshwater Supply District – new watershed protection plan. Interested in restoring forests in their source water protection watershed, as well as creating a watershed protection district to raise funds for source water protection.
- Cypress Springs Special Utility District – wants to educate landowners and work with the District to purchase key lands for watershed protection.
- Upper Trinity Regional Water District – developing a greenbelt plan to protect riparian areas. Interested in information about urban forestry and stormwater control, as well as help developing messages and conducting education and outreach.
  - iTree is a computer modeling program that provides information on the ecosystem service values of trees. TFS is investigating iTree Hydro to quantify stormwater benefits of urban forests
- Tarrant Regional Water District – interested in learning how to value ecosystem services and how to use/analyze this information in their watershed.
  - TFS has an online GIS-based tool for valuing forest ecosystem services <http://texasforestinfo.tamu.edu/map/fv>
- Trinity River Authority doesn't have a source water protection plan but would like one.

### **Forest sector needs and ideas:**

- Family forest landowners would like to see direct payments or tax abatements to help meet financial obligations and reward them for the watershed services their land provides.
  - Watershed protection incentives to encourage forest landowners not to convert or develop their land.
- Quantify forest land improvements and Best Management Practices benefits so that average person can understand this. Some recent studies that link forest land improvements to improved watershed function include:
  - University of Florida study showing that prescribed burning resulted in increased water flows and water quality benefits
  - Central Arkansas Water study of riparian buffer improvements resulting in lower turbidity loads to treatment plant
  - Auburn University – West Georgia Project – increase in impervious cover results in “urban stream syndrome”
  - Stephen F. Austin State University also has information.
- Develop a tree farm sign that landowners can post to let the public know the landowner is participating in watershed protection

The afternoon discussion centered around three key topics, which emerged as interest areas offered by participants in their answers to registration survey questions, and during the morning discussion.

### **Communication and Education**

- Biggest water quality issues for messaging are below. Specific messages will vary depending on location and audience:
  - Loss and management of forest lands (conversion to development, not using proper BMP's – subdivision example, changing demographics leading to forest land fragmentation, loss of wildland-urban mix)
  - Reducing contaminants (bacteria, turbidity, nutrients)

- Key audiences for forests and drinking water partnership include state legislators, landowners who may not yet be engaged in watershed protection, public “users” of water (customers, recreation).
- Identify who stakeholders are, and who they are already talking to (for example landowners talk with NRCS), and then plug into existing outreach mechanisms for those stakeholders to share messages and raise awareness. Use existing publications such as magazines, newsletters, and utility Consumer Confidence Reports) to get messages out. A good example of this is San Jacinto River Authority Consumer Confidence Report.
- Landowner outreach is complicated due to absentee landowners, changing ownership, and tenant farmers not engaged in watershed protection. Difficulty reaching them and getting their cooperation.
- Need strategic plan for landowner outreach and assistance – probably nationally, but maybe just starting with a few states or watersheds.
- ACTION – Consider using Minnesota Service Delivery Model to coordinate landowner outreach across multiple agencies.
- ACTION - Develop a common simple, easy to understand set of messages that are easy to remember.
- ACTION – Use successful, engaged landowners to help spread our messages.
- ACTION – Use utility Consumer Confidence Reports for getting out messages to the public about the importance of forested watersheds.
- ACTION – Use Association of Consulting Foresters for getting messages out
- Local Appraisal District – taxation issue. Convince them that yield of high quality water contributes to local economy
- ACTION – Conduct legislator outreach on key policy issues. Legislators are a priority group to reach out to – water is a hot topic, and they want information.
- ACTION - Use social media to get messages out.

## Funding

- Landowners may not know about available funding (due to changing landowner demographic). There are several NRCS funding programs. We need to figure out landowner interests/motivations and simplify the application process to encourage participation.
- Some BMP's may not be incentivized at a high enough level, or at all, to encourage landowner participation
- Middle Trinity watershed has had some success with corporate and private foundation funding through Sand County Foundation. Private funding helped match NWQI funds in Middle Trinity watershed for implementing conservation practices.
- State funding can be used to leverage NRCS and other federal funding
- ACTION - Focus on 2-3 TFS identified priority watersheds to brainstorm funding and do funding outreach for selected collaborative projects.
- ACTION - Make use of Texas Water Infrastructure Coordination Committee (<http://www.twicc.org>) as a way to get funding information out to audiences. They are very active and meet once a month. Anyone is welcome to attend the meetings and contribute. People can attend TWICC workshops to pitch funding proposal ideas and get feedback on which funding is the best fit.
- ACTION – Consider hosting a funding workshop to connect people in key watersheds to funding resources
- ACTION – Research private foundations and water-dependent corporations (MillerCoors, Coca-Cola, etc.) that may want to invest in watershed protection.
- ACTION - Research wetland mitigation funds as a potential funding source.
- ACTION – Connect landowners (and utilities) to existing funding sources
- ACTION – Research State Revolving Fund (Clean Water and Drinking Water SRF's) to learn how watershed protection projects are paid for with repaid interest on loans.
- ACTION – This may be a long shot, and a lot of work, but possibly approach legislators about using a state lottery ticket to fund these programs.

## Advancing the Texas Forests and Drinking Water Partnership

- Watershed impairment drives planning – for example, SJRA watershed protection plan. Funding is tied to impairment. NRCS also addresses impairment with some of their funding programs.
  - EPA Healthy Watersheds Program is focused on preventing impairments to threatened watersheds - South Llano River
  - NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) is prevention based
- SWIFT Program administered by Texas Water Development Board – we could try to build onto SWIFT in the following ways:
  - Private land stewardship as a water conservation strategy
  - Next update of State Water Plan is 2017 – can tap into this somehow
  - There isn't yet a specific focus on private land stewardship and the contribution to water – this represents an opportunity
- ACTION - Plug into existing efforts to achieve partnership objectives – such as SJRA west fork, Green Print, Conservation Delivery Network, SWIFT, and other projects and initiatives.
- ACTION – Identify which watersheds have done an excellent job with watershed planning and implementation and match these with the TFS priority watersheds to see where we might want to focus our efforts.
  - Add layer to the TFS watershed assessment to identify priority watersheds that have a watershed protection plan in place.
  - Use EPA Recovery Potential Screening Tool and other information to select specific priority watersheds to focus future pilot projects.
- ACTION – Convene another Forum in five or six months – identify 2 or 3 priority watersheds, make sure there is enough interest in these watersheds by the group. Be sure to engage utilities, landowners, and land use planning groups. The next meeting can focus on discussing these watersheds, invite representatives from these watersheds to give presentations on watershed protection needs and work together to brainstorm potential funding for

specific projects. Do a case study approach where you highlight success stories, get landowners engaged over long term.

- ACTION – Once we have decided which watersheds to focus on, develop a few key outcomes or metrics for watershed protection, such as:
  - Acres of healthy forest (including urban forests)
  - Turbidity improvements (raw water to treatment plants)
  - TWDB water conservation goals – figure out how to measure this.
- ACTION - Ask this group about which existing regional or state priorities should be considered for outreach to decision-makers (such as SWIFT, State Water Plan, State Forest Plan, coastal forest issue, etc.) Use this group to identify and move forward on policy issues associated with forested watersheds.

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## Appendix A Texas Forests and Drinking Water Forum Participants

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## **Appendix B Forum Background and Planning**

### **Forum Background**

The US Endowment for Forestry and Communities in Greenville, SC is using private and USDA Forest Service funding to partner with five southeastern states (Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, South Carolina and Texas) on a regional project called the Southeastern Partnership for Forests and Water. The effort is building on the work that South Carolina Rural Water conducted in Greenville, South Carolina in 2012, hosting a collaborative forum of drinking water utilities, forestry interests, state and local agencies, and conservation groups. The gathering provided information about the importance of drinking water source protection, forestry perspectives, and creative financing tools for source water protection in forested watersheds. Participants agreed that healthy, well-managed forests are critical to the Southeast's drinking water supply, and that maintaining or expanding healthy forests in watersheds is a cost-effective and appealing strategy for helping ensure clean, abundant supplies of water.

The goals of the Southeastern Partnership for Forests and Water are to:

- Help maintain or expand healthy forests in drinking water watersheds
- Initiate and develop working relationships between state and local agencies, Rural Water Associations, forestry interests and conservation groups
- Identify watersheds and initiatives that have high potential for cooperative forest conservation, sound management and restoration
- Explore pilot projects to implement creative watershed protection strategies such as Payment for Watershed Services and forestry best management practices, demonstrating the interdependence of healthy forests and drinking water.

To do this the Partnership hired a contractor, Kitty Weisman, to work with drinking water, forestry, and conservation partners from March 1, 2014 through February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016 to organize planning meetings in each of the five states with the ultimate goal of hosting a collaborative forests and drinking water forum in each state. The forums are modeled after the 2012 Greenville, South Carolina forum and are intended to share knowledge, available technical resources and assistance, and identify potential target watersheds in each state for further cooperative action.

### **Forum Planning**

Several leaders and stakeholders representing drinking water and forest organizations indicated an early interest in helping to plan a Texas Forests and Drinking Water Forum, including the Texas A&M Forest Service, Texas Rural Water Association, Texas Forestry Association, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, US Environmental Protection Agency – Region 6, American Water Works Association, Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, and Houston-Galveston Area Council. This core planning team had several in-person meetings to mobilize, and then had planning conference calls every 4 weeks for most of 2015 to plan the Forum.

The planning team decided several key logistical details for the Forum including:

- Ensure that invited participants and speakers were high-level decision-makers and experts who have the ability to carry forth and spread the messages of the Forum as leaders in their field.
- Plan and convene a professional gathering at a quality venue, providing meals and snacks with no registration fee.
- Have participants complete a brief survey when they register for the Forum, answering questions about key needs and challenges.
- Use survey responses to determine discussion topics.

- Host a networking social the evening before the Forum to introduce participants to each other and foster collaboration
- Don't be "lecture heavy" – build in lots of time for mingling and discussion, and keep presentations very short.
- Organize Forum speakers into key "themes" and limit speaking time to 15 minutes per speaker to ensure enough time for discussion and brainstorming.
- Ensure that discussion and brainstorming sessions were moderated by experienced meeting facilitators.
- Plan on attendance of 45-60 participants, including speakers.

Because the planning team decided that the Forum should include free meals and no registration fee, it became clear that the group would need to raise additional funds to pay for the venue and catering. In a relatively short time period, the group was able to raise enough funds for planning and conference costs (Appendix E).

**Appendix C**  
**Texas Forests and Drinking Water Forum Program**

*November 17 & 18, 2015*  
*La Torretta Lake Resort and Spa - Montgomery, Texas*

**November 17**

6:00 pm            **NETWORKING SOCIAL and *Forum Welcome*** – Jim Alexander,  
SJRA Board Member

**November 18**

8:00 – 8:45 am    **BREAKFAST** at La Torretta Resort

8:45 – 9:15 am    ***Forum Welcome, Goals and Objectives*** – Tom Boggus, Director,  
Texas A&M Forest Service and Lara Zent, Interim Executive  
Director, Texas Rural Water Association

***Southeastern Partnership for Forests and Water*** – Hughes  
Simpson, Texas A&M Forest Service

***The Connection between Forests and Drinking Water*** – Peter  
Stangel, US Endowment for Forestry and Communities

9:15 – 10:00 am    ***Drinking Water Sector Overview (regulatory, infrastructure  
including treatment, challenges)*** – Lara Zent and Celia Eaves,  
Texas Rural Water Association

***Drinking Water Source Protection – Federal, State and Local  
Perspectives*** – Deborah McMullan, Texas Rural Water  
Association, and Mason Miller, Texas Commission on  
Environmental Quality

10:00 – 10:15 am    **QUESTIONS and DISCUSSION**

10:15 – 10:30 am    **BREAK**

10:30 – 11:15 am    ***Texas Forest Sector Overview*** – Ron Hufford, Texas Forestry  
Association

***Texas Forestry BMPs / Priority Watersheds*** – Hughes Simpson,  
Texas A&M Forest Service

***Alto Watershed Project: Effectiveness of Forestry BMPs*** – Dr.  
Matthew McBroom, Stephen F. Austin State University

- 11:15 – 11:30 am **QUESTIONS and DISCUSSION**
- 11:30 – 1:00 pm **LUNCH** – Representative Cecil Bell, Jr., Keynote Speaker
- 1:00 – 1:20 pm ***Watershed Protection Success Stories – What’s Working Regionally and Around the Country*** – Kitty Weisman, Consultant with US Endowment for Forestry and Communities
- 1:20 – 2:00 pm **QUESTIONS, DISCUSSION AND BRAINSTORMING**  
What opportunities exist in Texas for communication, cooperation, and developing collaborative forest and drinking water partnerships? Which geographic areas should we focus on?
- 2:00 – 2:15 pm **BREAK**
- 2:15 – 3:15 pm ***Facilitated Group Discussion***
- 3:15 – 3:45 pm ***Breakout Groups Present Highlights of their Discussions***
- 3:45 – 4:00 pm **WRAP UP** – Overview of Forum Highlights and Next Steps – Hughes Simpson, Texas A&M Forest Service

## **Appendix D**

### **Forum Registration Survey Response Summary**

*In order of popularity (number of total responses is in parentheses)*

What are some questions you have about the current status of forests and drinking water in Texas?

1. Forestry BMPs and forest practices - overview, effectiveness and compliance rate, impacts to water quality (specifically dead tree removal, pesticide spray programs, riparian buffers, fires and fire suppression) (10)
2. Forest land cover/water treatment cost connection and quantification of ecosystem services values (11)
3. Drinking water utility information - source water protection programs and challenges, operations and drivers (including contaminants of concern) (7)
4. Water quality protection/improvement, watershed management - approaches/methods/practices (6)
5. Forest conservation incentives and landowner compensation (including water rights) (5)
6. Utility/forestry collaboration efforts and examples (4)
7. Groundwater and surface water availability and projections, urban area drinking water supply and demand for future, where will we get water from and how (4)
8. How to work with landowners, utilities, conservation groups on watershed protection priorities? (3)
9. Watershed status for major metropolitan areas (impervious surface cover %, amount of protected lands)
10. How do utilities communicate with customers?
11. What are the primary threats to forested watersheds in Texas?
12. From the water utility perspective, what are the pros and cons offered by forests?
13. What is the status of timber industry compliance with the Texas Forest Service Best Management Practices?

What are your three biggest challenges or concerns in the work that you do?

1. Communication, education/outreach, and information sharing (to landowners, importance of forests, importance of riparian vegetation/buffers, outreach/education of utilities and customers, importance of landscape-level initiatives, explaining technical information) (18)
2. Funding/financial (need for, lack of, landowner compensation, affordable water rates) (17)
3. Water Pollution (nonpoint source, bacterial impairment, turbidity, harmful algal blooms) and water quantity (climate change), impacts to drinking water treatment (11)
4. Competing priorities and need for coordination (11)
5. Forest sustainability, conservation, keeping forests in forest, forest fragmentation, improved forest practices for water quality protection (7)
6. Increasing land pressures, increasing population, suburban sprawl, impacts of growth on water supply (7)
7. Land management regulations, utility regulations, regulatory confusion (6)
8. How to make business case for watershed protection/restoration (5)
9. Attracting and retaining high quality water utility personnel (4)
10. How to be strategic about watershed protection/restoration (3)
11. Implementing and maintaining watershed protection over long term

12. Absentee landowners
13. Monitoring water quality in the lower Trinity River Basin is an ongoing challenge in our work.
14. A concern would be siltation and loss of storage volume in the Livingston Reservoir. Siltation and subsequent turbidity increases drinking water treatment costs.
15. An additional concern relating to forestry and water quality would be the possibility of harm to water resources from the over use of herbicides by the timber industry.

**What keeps you from making progress with the above three challenges/concerns?**

1. Lack of resources (personnel, funding, ecosystem services compensation, etc.) (19)
2. Misinformation and confusion, lack of sound data/information for land owners, lack of knowledge about existing laws and regulations lack of effective outreach/communication strategies (14)
3. Political deadlocks, lack of political will or public resistance to change, competing political priorities, conflicting policies, lack of commitment to create and implement watershed plans, overall difficulty of watershed protection (11)
4. Lack of time (9)
5. Population growth and land development, conversion of rural lands/open space to development (4)
6. Lack of decision-making authority (3)
7. Lack of contacts/network (2)
8. Lack of data on watershed status/condition, and benefits of natural lands/forests on water quality (3)

**Appendix E**  
**Texas Forests and Drinking Water Forum Sponsors**

American Water Works Association (AWWA), Texas Section

San Jacinto River Authority

Texas A&M Forest Service

Texas Forestry Association

Texas Rural Water Association

Texas Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) State Implementation  
Committee

Texas Tree Farm Program

U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities