

Preserving Public Land for Economic and Environmental Benefit

Key Takeaways:

- State parks drive rural economic growth.
- Conserving habitat and farm lands yields important ecological benefits, including the protection of water resources.

Background:

Earlier this year, Texas 2036 and the Center for Public Finance and Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy released a report on the regional economic benefits associated with state parks. The report found that every \$1 that Texas spends on state parks yields between \$4-\$12 in economic return. Further, the economic benefits of state parks are pronounced in rural counties: those Texas rural counties with state parks experienced significant growth in population, GDP, and employment. Although the Legislature dedicated sporting goods sales tax revenues for parks development in 2019, additional appropriations are needed to expand Texas' parks and parkland inventory.

Beyond the need for more parkland, the conservation of habitat and farmland easements is essential for the protection of wildlife species and water resources. As urban growth continues, greater state efforts are needed to preserve lands for these important purposes.

Proposed Action:

Support greater state funding for park acquisition, development, and maintenance. Exceptional Item #1 seeks \$32.1 million for addressing TPWD's capital construction and maintenance backlog. While the requested appropriations here are for needed restorations and improvements to TPWD headquarters, hatcheries, and game warden facilities, it is recommended that additional appropriations be considered to accelerate renovations to parks in rural areas. Further, additional consideration should be given towards increasing appropriations for strategic acquisition of parkland where feasible.

Support Exceptional Item #4 for the expansion of Wildlife Management Areas. This exceptional item seeks \$10 million for the acquisition of migratory game bird habitat. In addition to the benefits of preserving habitat for game birds, which is discussed in TPWD's LAR, this exceptional item would have the added benefit of the likely preservation of wetlands and riparian habitat essential for the protection of water quality. Further, these types of lands can often serve as a nature-based solution for flood control and mitigation strategies. Lastly, habitat preservation expands the amount of land potentially available for threatened or endangered species listed under the US Endangered Species Act. Appropriating funds for the preservation of these species' habitat may mitigate future takings claims under the Act.

Support Exceptional Item #5 for the Texas Farm & Ranchlands Conservation Program. This exceptional item seeks \$8 million to conserve certain farm and ranch lands that are at risk of development. The preservation of these open spaces is essential for the conservation of water resources. Specifically, farm and ranch lands can play an integral role in maximizing open spaces available for groundwater recharge, and for enabling filtration that protects surface water stream quality. Given the onset of rapid urban growth across Texas, this program is a needed tool for preserving and protecting our state's groundwater and surface water resources.