



## **Hays County, Texas**

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### **Information for the News Media**

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### **Hays County Submits Regional Habitat Plan**

**Hays County Courthouse, San Marcos, TX** – Hays County Commissioners recently gave unanimous approval to a final draft of the Hays County Regional Habitat Conversation Plan (RHCP), which has been submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for approval.

An approved RHCP commits the County to implementing a habitat conservation program to protect endangered species while allowing a faster, smoother application process for what is known as “incidental takings” of those species through otherwise lawful development by a governmental agency or private citizen.

“We are working aggressively to start the RHCP preserve system as early as this year,” said Precinct 4 Commissioner Karen Ford. “The RHCP is compatible with other County initiatives to protect open space, such as is described in the County’s Parks and Open Space Master Plan and envisioned by the 2007 Parks and Open Space bond program.”

The RHCP provides a locally controlled approach for compliance with the Federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) with respect to two endangered songbirds, the golden-cheeked warbler and black-capped vireo. The RHCP is also designed to benefit a host of other wildlife species, water resources and people.

“The RHCP is a great example of how proper planning can blend the interests of the environment, people and laws to make the system work for the community,” said Precinct 3 Commissioner Will Conley, who spearheaded the RHCP. “The RHCP will help the County serve the needs of its growing population and will promote responsible economic development, good public infrastructure and open space preservation.”

The RHCP proposes to assemble between 10,000 and 15,000 acres of preserve land over the 30-year duration of the plan. It will also allow the County, private landowners, business enterprises and other local governments whose activities could impact the warbler or vireo (resulting in “incidental take” of these species) to comply with the ESA in a more efficient, streamlined, and timely manner. Processing individual incidental take authorizations (such as in situations where an RHCP is not available) typically takes one to two years. Under the RHCP incidental take authorization could be obtained within a matter of weeks and potentially at less cost than obtaining individual incidental take authorization from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

. The RHCP preserve system will create opportunities for compatible, nature-based recreational uses and will contribute to water quality protection by permanently protecting large blocks of open space.

The RHCP was submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service with a preliminary draft Environmental Impact Statement as part of an ESA permit application at the end of March. The County worked with Loomis Partners of Austin, an environmental consulting services company, and the Austin law firm of Smith Robertson, which focuses on environment and land-use law, in developing the RHCP.

The RHCP was initiated in response to a need for ESA compliance during the planning and construction of Winters Mill Parkway near Wimberley, which was completed in 2006. The County was awarded a \$753,750 grant from the Service (with \$251,250 in County matching funds) to help develop the RHCP.

Additional information about the RHCP is available at [www.hayscountyhcp.com](http://www.hayscountyhcp.com).

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