



# LAND ACCESS

Toward Preserving Land in Central Texas for  
Regenerative Farming

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## INTRODUCTION

This report aims to highlight the pressing need for investment in farmland preservation strategies and to propose achievable strategies to launch the Working Farms Fund in Central Texas, ensuring long-term agricultural viability and equity. This report will aim to identify areas for prime farmland that meet the operational and social needs of the next generation farmers, discuss the current conservation efforts underway in Texas, and present strategies for ongoing investment in preserving farmland in Central Texas.

Land access in the context of agriculture refers to the ability of farmers to obtain and maintain ownership or long-term use of land for farming purposes. It is a critical component for the sustainability of farming communities as it directly impacts the ability to produce food, maintain rural economies, and preserve agricultural traditions. Ensuring equitable land access is essential for supporting new and socially disadvantaged farmers, who often face significant barriers due to high land costs, competition from non-agricultural buyers, and historical inequities

### IMPORTANCE AND TIMELINESS

The loss of farmland to development is not a phenomenon unique to Texas, and farmland access is something that farmers across the country have struggled with for decades. However, local and micro-economic factors can make this issue present itself differently in various parts of the country, or even the state.

Addressing land access is particularly urgent due to several converging factors:

1. **Urban Sprawl:** Rapid urbanization leads to the conversion of farmland into residential, commercial, and industrial uses, reducing the availability of land for agriculture. This trend is pronounced in regions like Central Texas, where expanding urban areas increase land prices and limit farming opportunities.
2. **Climate Change:** Climate change poses a threat to agricultural productivity through increased frequency of extreme weather events, shifts in growing seasons, and water scarcity. Ensuring farmers have secure land access is crucial for implementing adaptive and resilient agricultural practices.
3. **Economic Pressures:** Farmers face rising costs for inputs, land, and equipment, alongside fluctuating wholesale prices. These economic pressures make it challenging to acquire and retain land, particularly for new and socially disadvantaged farmers. Financial instability can lead to land loss, further exacerbating food security issues

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND RECOGNITION

Socially disadvantaged farmers, including those who are Black, Native American, Hispanic, Asian, and women, have historically faced systemic barriers in accessing land. Acknowledging this history is crucial

for understanding and addressing the current disparities in land ownership and access. For instance, the legacy of discriminatory lending practices and land seizures has left many minority farmers with significantly less land compared to their white counterparts<sup>1</sup> (Willingham, 2019).

According to The National Young Farmers Coalition's new report, *Building a Future with Farmers 2022: Results and Recommendations from the National Young Farmer Survey*<sup>2</sup>, finding affordable land to buy is the top challenge for Young Farmers today. This is understandable, given that the average age of the respondents was 32 years old and that 78% identified as first-generation farmers. Without the presence of family land or wealth, or some large windfall early in life, most people in their early 30's have not had time to accumulate enough wealth to allow for the purchase of land at current prices.

This could lead one to believe that the problem is a simple matter of timing and access to capital, however, there is a cultural and demographic issue at play as well.

The National Young Farmers Coalition report also provided the following data:

- 63.5% of young farmers surveyed identify as female, nonbinary, or a gender other than cisgender male.
- 24.4% of young farmers surveyed identify as a sexuality other than heterosexual.
- Only 36.5% of young farmers identified as male.
- 74% of Black farmers said one of their farm's primary purposes is anti-racism work or promoting healing from White Supremacy.

This is not a demographic primarily consisting of cisgender, white men, but rather, a more diverse group – with regards to age, gender, sexuality, and gender identity. This is an important point, as acceptance and community play a large role in where people choose to live and where they feel safe.

According to the U.S. census from 2020, 93% of Texas counties had fewer same-sex households than the national average.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, according to the Movement Advancement Project's website - [LGBTMap.org](https://www.lgbtmap.org)<sup>4</sup> - only 14% of the Texas Population has any protections against discrimination based on Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity. Only seven Texas counties contain cities with City Level laws in place to offer such protections, including Travis County and six counties around the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. Texas received MAP's lowest rating possible for protections for the LGBTQ+ community – Negative – with a score of -0.5 out of a possible 44.5.

When looking at the demographic make-up of the next generation of farmers (those under the age of 40), against the backdrop of their support and protection in Texas, it becomes clear that there is a mismatch between where these farmers want to and feel safe living, and where affordable farmland is located. It's no surprise that most young farmers in the area want to live within a short distance of Austin. Not all young farmers fall into this bucket, but according to the data, a majority do. It would be irresponsible of us to expect them to move to, start families in, or embrace areas where they don't feel a sense of community, a sense of support, or worst of all, safety. A comprehensive framework for land

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/08/Black-Farmers-report1.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youngfarmers.org/resource/nationalsurveyreport2022/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.texastribune.org/2023/08/23/texas-lgbtq-population/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.lgbtmap.org/equality\\_maps/profile\\_state/TX](https://www.lgbtmap.org/equality_maps/profile_state/TX)

access that centers equity and justice for socially disadvantaged farmers must be multi-faceted, addressing both historical injustices and contemporary barriers

## WORKING FARMS FUND OVERVIEW

This report also aims to align our work behind an established framework to support land access: the Working Farms Fund.

The Working Farms Fund is an innovative program housed in the Conservation Fund, a national nonprofit, designed to support land access for farmers through a buy-lease-protect-sell model. The fund purchases farmland, leases it to farmers with an option to purchase, and places conservation easements on the land to ensure it remains dedicated to agriculture. The goal of this model is to provide a patient pathway to farm ownership for next generation farmers, supporting environmental conservation and economic resilience for rural communities.

The program has achieved notable successes in other regions. In the Southeastern U.S., it has effectively preserved farmland and supported farmers by collaborating with local land trusts and leveraging state and federal funding for conservation easements<sup>5</sup>. In the Northeastern U.S., similar initiatives have integrated farmland preservation with regional planning, connecting farmers with affordable land through partnerships with local governments and non-profit organizations, like New York's Farmland Protection Program.

In lieu of statewide efforts aimed at preserving farmland for small farms, especially those owned and operated by a new demographic of farmers, a partnership between non-profits, land trusts, and local municipalities is a viable model for Central Texas.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffkart/2022/11/27/conservation-fund-program-supports-local-farms-and-local-food-near-metro-areas/?sh=cf71e8d45252>

## DEFINING OUR REGION

The USDA defines prime farmland as land that has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing food, feed, forage, fiber and other crops. The Natural Resources Conservation Service identifies these high-quality lands further, dividing them into prime farmland, unique farmland, and land of statewide or local importance<sup>6</sup>. While these definitions are helpful to identify areas for needed protection or even to enroll in certain federal programs, they do not go far enough to define an area of interest for young or beginning farmers today. Furthermore, these classifications only serve to determine suitability for growing commodity crops and are not able to determine suitability for specialty crops. To do so, we must look at the cost, water availability and quality, soil composition, proximity to markets, and conservation potential.

## WATER AVAILABILITY AND POLICY

Water availability is a critical factor for agriculture in Central Texas, significantly influencing the region's agricultural productivity and sustainability. Central Texas is characterized by diverse water resources, including aquifers, rivers, and reservoirs, which are governed by a complex web of policies and regulations. Understanding these resources and policies is essential for developing effective farmland preservation strategies and ensuring sustainable agricultural practices.

### Aquifers and Groundwater Resources

Central Texas relies heavily on groundwater for agricultural use, with several key aquifers providing much of the water needed for irrigation and other farming activities. The most significant aquifers in the region include the Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer, the Edwards Aquifer, and the Trinity Aquifer.

- Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer: This aquifer is one of the most important groundwater sources in Central Texas, extending across several counties and providing water for agricultural, municipal, and industrial uses. The aquifer is known for its relatively high yield and good water quality, making it a vital resource for farmers in the region. However, the sustainability of the Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer is threatened by increasing demand and over-extraction, which can lead to declining water levels and reduced availability for future use. In most of the state, beginning in 2023 with the passage of SB 2440, any new development is required to obtain a Groundwater Availability Certification to ensure adequate groundwater availability for the development being proposed<sup>7</sup>. However, there are certain exemptions to this rule, with one such exemption pertaining to the lands over the Carrizo-Wilcox aquifer. While this would lead one to believe that there is "plenty of water to go around" in this area, it does create an environment where regulators have less authority to enforce limits on growth and that could threaten the health of the aquifer – and land values.
- Edwards Aquifer: The Edwards Aquifer is another critical groundwater resource, particularly for areas like San Antonio. It is renowned for its high recharge rate and capacity, but it is also highly

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=9708ede640c640aca1de362589e60f46>

<sup>7</sup> [Groundwater Availability Certification](#)

vulnerable to pollution and overuse. The Edwards Aquifer Authority (EAA) manages this aquifer, implementing strict regulations to balance water use with conservation efforts. Agricultural users must adhere to these regulations, which include limits on water withdrawal and requirements for water conservation practices<sup>8</sup>.

- Trinity Aquifer: The Trinity Aquifer underlies much of Central Texas and provides water for various uses, including agriculture. However, this aquifer is generally less prolific than the Carrizo-Wilcox and Edwards Aquifers, with more variable water quality and availability. Managing the Trinity Aquifer involves careful monitoring and regulation to ensure sustainable use and to protect against depletion and contamination.

### Surface Water Resources

In addition to groundwater, Central Texas has several significant surface water resources, including rivers, lakes, and reservoirs. These surface waters are crucial for irrigation, livestock watering, and other agricultural needs.

- Colorado River: The Colorado River is a major surface water source in Central Texas, supporting a wide range of agricultural activities. The river and its associated reservoirs, such as Lake Travis and Lake Buchanan, are managed by the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA). The LCRA regulates water use, implements conservation measures, and ensures that water quality is maintained to support both agricultural and municipal needs.
- Guadalupe River: Another important surface water resource, the Guadalupe River, flows through Central Texas and is managed by the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority (GBRA). The river supports agricultural irrigation, particularly for crops like rice and corn, and provides water for livestock. The GBRA implements policies to manage water allocations, protect water quality, and promote sustainable use.

### Water Policy and Management

Texas is a Right of Capture state, meaning that if you own the land above it, you can extract as much water from below the ground - via a water well - as needed<sup>9</sup>. Texas is the only state in the US in which landowners privately own groundwater. This fact is one that makes water policy in the state very unique.

- Texas Water Code: The Texas Water Code is the primary legal framework governing water use in the state. It establishes the rights and responsibilities of water users, including agricultural users, and provides the basis for water allocation, permitting, and conservation. The code also outlines the roles of various state agencies, such as the Texas Commission on Environmental

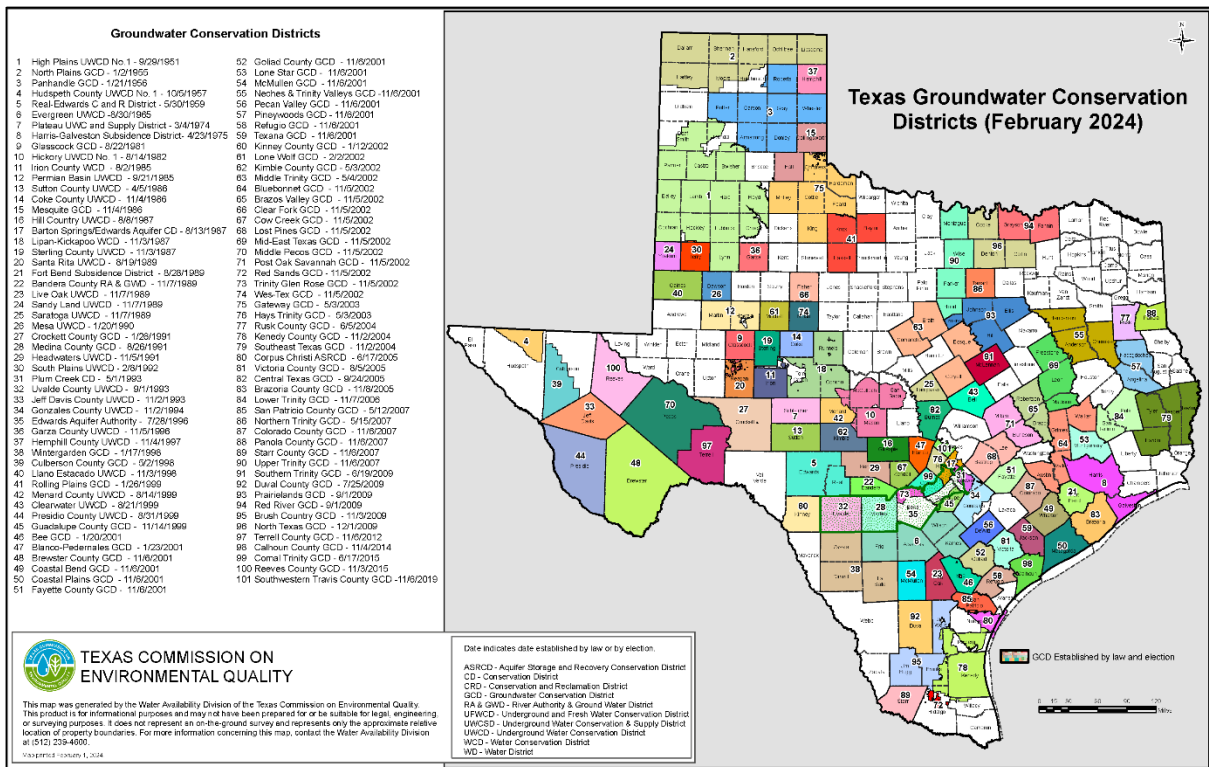
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<sup>8</sup> [https://www.edwardsaquifer.org/doc\\_publications/environmental-impact-statement/](https://www.edwardsaquifer.org/doc_publications/environmental-impact-statement/)

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.twdb.texas.gov/publications/reports/numbered\\_reports/doc/R361/1%20CH%20Potter.pdf](https://www.twdb.texas.gov/publications/reports/numbered_reports/doc/R361/1%20CH%20Potter.pdf)

Quality (TCEQ) and the Texas Water Development Board (TWDB), in managing and protecting water resources.

- **Groundwater Conservation Districts (GCDs):** Groundwater Conservation Districts are local entities responsible for managing groundwater resources within their respective boundaries. In Central Texas, several GCDs oversee the use of aquifers, including the Carrizo-Wilcox, Edwards, and Trinity Aquifers. These districts implement rules on well drilling, water withdrawal limits, and conservation practices to ensure sustainable groundwater use. Farmers must work with their local GCDs to obtain permits and comply with regulations governing groundwater use.
- **Regional Water Planning Groups:** The TWDB organizes regional water planning groups that develop long-term water plans for different regions of Texas. These plans, updated every five years, assess water supply and demand, identify potential shortages, and propose strategies to meet future water needs. The planning process involves input from various stakeholders, including agricultural users, to ensure that the needs of the farming community are considered in water management decisions.



With demographers projecting an additional 20 million people calling Texas home by 2050, no part of the state will be immune to these issues. Even the seemingly "water rich" areas between Austin and the gulf coast.



## SOIL TYPE AND COMPOSITION

Soil type and composition are critical factors determining the suitability of land for agricultural use, especially for growing specialty crops such as fruits, vegetables, and nuts. In Central Texas, the diversity of soil types influences which crops can be effectively cultivated and how land can be managed for sustainable agricultural production.

### Blackland Prairie

The Blackland Prairie, one of the primary soil regions in Central Texas, is characterized by its deep, fertile clay soils, known as Houston Black series. The fertility of Blackland Prairie soils supports the growth of specialty crops such as tomatoes, peppers, and melons. The high nutrient content is beneficial for these crops, though the soil's tendency to compact and retain water necessitates careful management practices like raised beds and organic matter incorporation to improve soil structure and drainage.

### Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer Region

The Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer region, spanning parts of Bastrop, Caldwell, and Guadalupe counties, features sandy loam soils that are well-drained and less prone to compaction than the clay soils of the Blackland Prairie<sup>10</sup>. These soils are particularly favorable for root vegetables and other specialty crops that require well-drained soils. Crops such as carrots, sweet potatoes, and peanuts thrive in the sandy loam soils of this region. These soils support the root development and ease of harvesting necessary for these crops. Additionally, the relatively good drainage helps prevent root diseases and allows for extended growing seasons.

### Colorado River Floodplain

Along the Colorado River, the floodplain soils are typically alluvial, consisting of a mix of sand, silt, and clay. These soils are highly fertile due to the periodic deposition of nutrient-rich sediments during flooding events. However, they also require careful management to prevent erosion and nutrient runoff. Farmers in this region can take advantage of the nutrient-rich soil to produce crops that require high fertility levels. Like leafy greens, herbs, and other high-value crops, and benefit from the consistent moisture supply provided by the river.

### Edwards Plateau

The Edwards Plateau, located to the west of Central Texas, is characterized by shallow, rocky soils interspersed with deeper pockets of loam and clay loam. While generally less fertile than the soils of the Blackland Prairie or the Colorado River floodplain, certain areas of the Edwards Plateau can still support specialty crop production with appropriate management. The rocky, well-drained soils are particularly suitable for viticulture, as grapevines thrive in soils that provide excellent drainage and reduced nutrient

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.twdb.texas.gov/groundwater/aquifer/majors/carrizo-wilcox.asp>

levels, which promote concentrated fruit flavors. Olives also do well in these conditions, benefiting from the well-drained soils and the region's climate.

## REAL ESTATE SURVEY: ANALYSIS OF RURAL AND PERI-URBAN LAND COSTS IN THE CENTRAL TEXAS-AUSTIN 10-COUNTY MSA

The Central Texas-Austin metropolitan area, encompassing ten counties, has experienced significant land price increases over the past decade. Despite a slight deceleration in growth, the region remains a focal point for both residential and commercial development, profoundly impacting agricultural land values. As the Austin area fell to the second fastest-growing large metro area between 2022 and 2023, the pressures on land availability and costs have continued unabated<sup>11</sup>.

### Population Growth and Urban Sprawl

The rapid population growth in suburban areas such as Georgetown and Leander in Williamson County, which rank among the highest in the nation for population increases, has led to significant urban sprawl. Similarly, Kyle in Hays County has experienced a substantial population surge. These developments result in the continuous conversion of farmland into residential areas, thereby escalating land prices and reducing available agricultural land.

### Migration Trends and Demographic Shifts

While Travis County has seen a negative net migration, surrounding counties within the Austin-Round Rock-San Marcos Statistical Area (MSA) have experienced population increases<sup>12</sup>. This trend is driven by residents moving from the Austin/Travis County area to neighboring counties due to higher housing prices and the overall cost of living in the city. This outward migration exacerbates the pressure on rural and peri-urban land, leading to further development and loss of agricultural space.

### Drivers of Land Price Increases

According to Roel Lopez of the Real Estate Center at Texas A&M University, there are three main drivers for the move to more rural areas across Texas, and the subsequent increase in land and home prices in these areas. They are:

1. COVID-19 Pandemic: The shift to remote work initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic continues to influence migration patterns. Many individuals prefer moving to smaller communities with lower living costs while maintaining their employment in larger metros, thus increasing demand for rural land.
2. Economic Growth: The favorable business environment in Texas, often referred to as the "Texas Miracle," attracts numerous companies to the state. Significant developments such as the Tesla Gigafactory in East Austin, the relocation of SpaceX and The Boring Company to Bastrop County,

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.austintexas.gov/news/new-census-data-austin-metro-slips-top-spot-remains-one-nations-fastest-growing-regions>

<sup>12</sup> <https://services.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=420425>

and Samsung’s multi-billion-dollar chip factory in eastern Williamson County have driven population growth and housing demand. Additionally, these developments have sometimes led to conflicts between new industries and existing agricultural operations, as evidenced by the tensions between Elon Musk’s enterprises and organic farmers in Bastrop County<sup>13</sup>.

3. Rural Broadband Expansion: Efforts to expand broadband access in rural areas have made it feasible for people to move to these regions while continuing to work remotely. The increased connectivity has made rural living more attractive, contributing to rising land values in these areas.

#### Impact of Migration on Land Prices

The migration to rural communities within the Texas Triangle (comprising Dallas-Fort Worth, San Antonio, and Houston) has led to rural land prices approaching those of urban areas. This convergence in land prices results in the loss of agricultural land and makes it increasingly difficult for local residents and farmers to afford land for agricultural use.

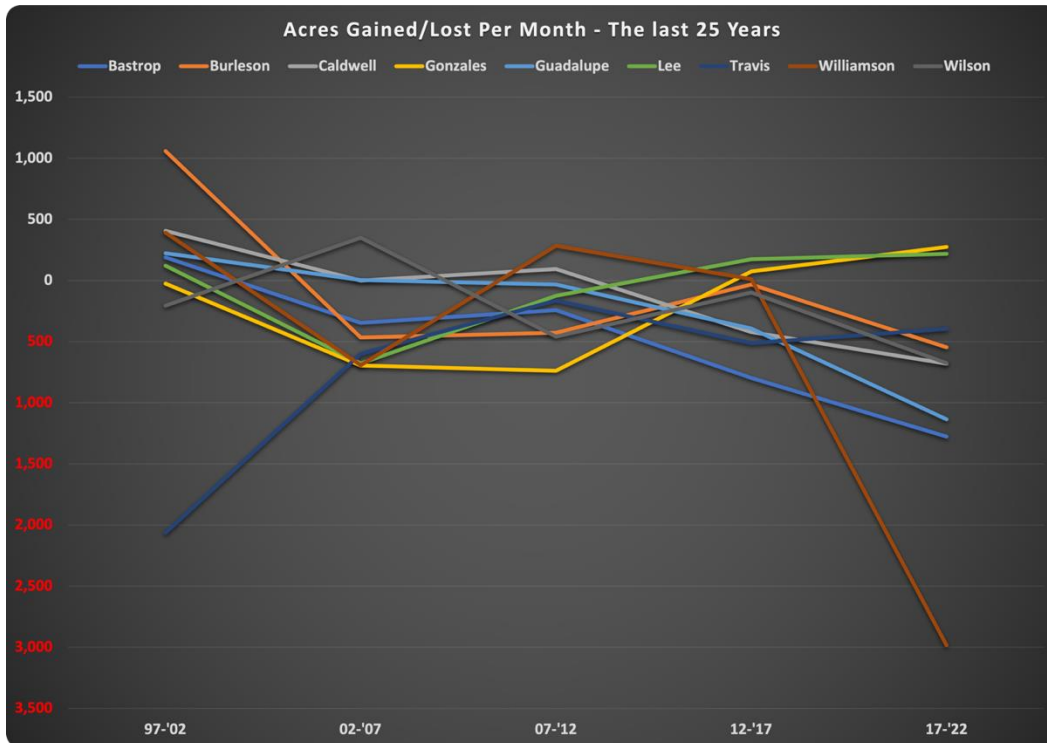
#### Market Outlook and Historical Trends

The Real Estate Center at Texas A&M University has adjusted its 2024 Outlook for Texas Land Markets<sup>14</sup>, anticipating that land prices will remain stable or increase slightly in the second half of 2024. This revision reflects stronger-than-expected market conditions, suggesting that the region is likely to experience a “soft landing” economically. Historically, Texas land values have shown resilience, spiking during economic booms and stabilizing or correcting during downturns. Notable examples include the 1980s oil price spike and subsequent real estate collapse, and the more recent banking crisis of the mid-2000s and the COVID-19 pandemic. Regulatory changes have mitigated some of the impacts of these financial disruptions, helping stabilize real estate markets over time.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.texasmonthly.com/news-politics/elon-musk-vs-organic-farmers-bastrop/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://trerc.tamu.edu/article/texaslandmarket-2268/#:~:text=Our%20latest%20forecast%20model%20for,by%20the%20end%20of%202025.>



When compared to other counties in Central Texas, Travis County is ahead of the curve with regards to farmland loss. This is because the growth of Austin started to accelerate in the 1990’s, mainly driven by the general “.com boom” of the time. As a result, it doesn’t have as much farmland to lose at this point and is losing land at the slowest rate of any county within Austin MSA. Williamson County was the next to get hit hard, with the growth of Georgetown, Pflugerville, Hutto and Taylor areas – a result of the headquarters of Dell Computers relocating to Round Rock and Pflugerville and home price increases in Travis County<sup>15</sup>. The most recent 5-year period has seen the effect of large development projects, such as Samsung’s large microchip factory in eastern Williamson County, resulting in the loss of farmland at an alarming rate – like the rate seen in Travis County during the 90’s. Similarly, growth on the northeast side of San Antonio has driven a huge uptick in the amount of farmland lost in Guadalupe and Wilson Counties in the last half-decade. Almost all counties – except Travis – were adding farmland acreage in the 90’s. However, almost all counties included in the Austin and San Antonio MSAs are losing farmland now.

<sup>15</sup> <https://communityimpact.com/austin/cedar-park-far-northwest-austin/government/2024/06/06/williamson-countys-total-property-value-increases-by-9-billion/>

<b>Projections</b>			
	<b>Original Winter 2024</b>	<b>Revised Spring 2024</b>	<b>Why it changed</b>
<b>RESIDENTIAL</b>			
<b>Single-Family Housing</b>			
Deliveries	↑	✓	Stable pipeline this year.
Prices	↓	↔	Prices flat to potentially higher by year-end.
Sales	↔	↑	Sales could see a small increase over 2023.
Rent	↓	↔	Single-family rents flat to slightly positive.
<b>Multifamily Housing</b>			
Deliveries	↑	✓	Few new starts this year.
Rent	↓	↔	Rent increases are less than originally projected on strong deliveries.
<b>LAND</b>			
<b>Rural Land Market</b>			
Sales	↓	↔	Seeing smaller declines and expecting some increases in the second half of the year.
Prices	↓	✓	Overall statewide prices are still expected to be lower year over year.

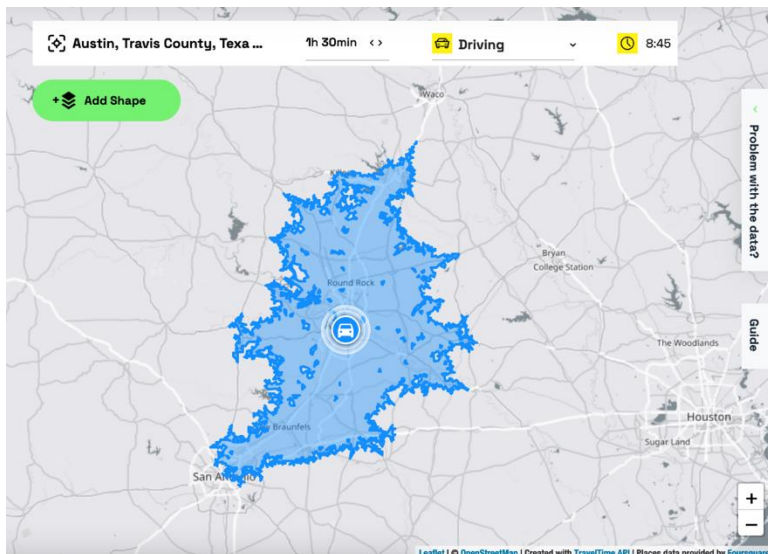
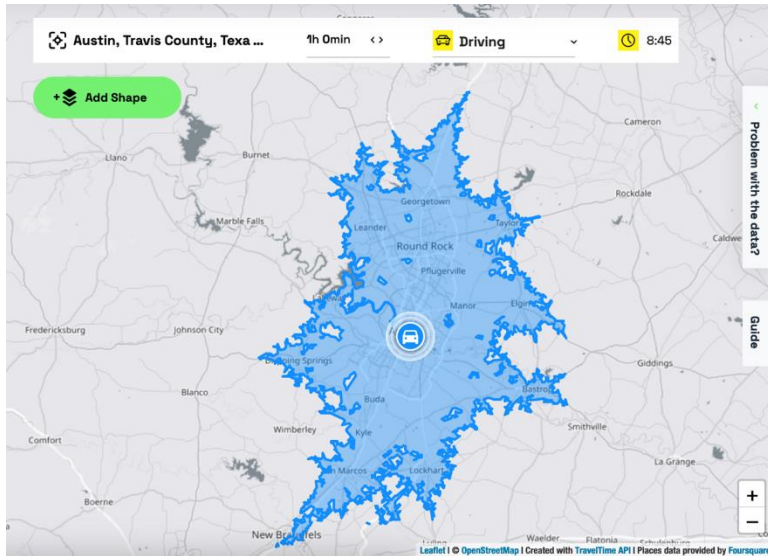
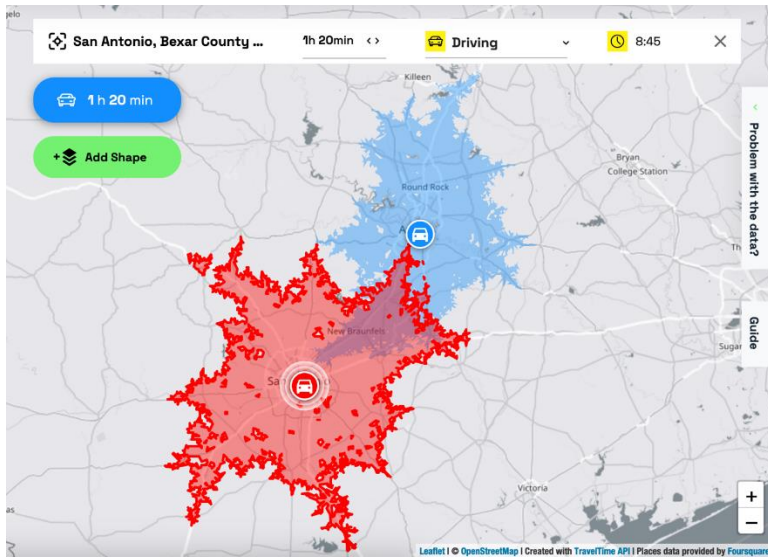
In contrast, counties outside of the Austin and San Antonio MSAs have not seen substantial increases in farmland loss from one census period to the next. Examples include Lee, Gonzales and Burleson Counties. In fact, a few of these counties added farm operations, and put more acreage into production than the previous reporting period.<sup>16</sup>

Given the current and projected trends, Central Texas farmland will likely continue to appreciate, making the present time the most affordable it will be in the foreseeable future. The analogy of a “late fee” aptly describes the increasing cost of inaction—delaying farmland preservation efforts only escalates future expenses. Immediate action is necessary to secure farmland at current prices, preventing further loss and ensuring the sustainability of agricultural operations in Central Texas.

## MARKET DEMAND

Farmers are not a monolith – especially when it comes to choosing their preferred market for sales. Some farmers prefer to home in on a selection of crops they can provide in bulk during the season and sell all their products through a wholesale outlet. Some prefer to grow a wide variety of crops to sell directly to their community through farmers’ markets, CSA’s or local restaurants.

<sup>16</sup> Most recent Ag Census Data provided by the USDA: <https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/>



These maps show areas with various proximities to Austin’s Central Texas Food Bank and the San Antonio Food Bank. Of note, these locations were chosen as simple waypoints, and are not intended to assume that either would be a high-volume purchaser of fresh food products from farmers. The purpose of these maps is to show areas within Central Texas that could realistically serve both the Austin and San Antonio markets, strengthening the sales opportunities of farmers that grow in these areas.

In addition to the general public desire for local foods, Sustainable Food Center is involved in creating demand and purchasing power through the following programs:

#### Farm to School Initiatives

Farm to school programs in Central Texas create a direct market for local farmers by integrating locally grown produce into school meal programs. These initiatives support local agriculture by providing stable demand and helping farmers establish a reliable customer base. Additionally, they promote healthy eating habits among students and foster community connections between schools and local farms. SFC provides technical assistance, matchmaking, and data analysis to school systems in Central Texas that are growing their local purchasing.

#### Grocery Retail Investments

Grocery retailers in Central Texas show increasing interest in sourcing locally grown food to meet consumer demand for fresh, sustainable products. This trend presents significant opportunities for local farmers, as partnerships with grocery stores can offer substantial sales channels and increase the visibility of local produce. Investment from retailers in local food systems also supports the economic viability of small and mid-sized farms. Sustainable Food Center runs Double Up Food Bucks – a nutrition incentive program that doubles the amount of SNAP a family can use for fresh fruits and vegetables – and has expanded this program to 54 diverse farm direct and grocery retail locations. This program has multiple beneficiaries, households have expanded purchasing power and grocers are incentivized to increase their offerings of locally grown fruits and vegetables. As this program expands, we expect to see increased investment in local procurement through regional grocery chains.

#### Wholesale Interest

Wholesalers such as Common Market and other entities are interested in sourcing from local farmers, providing another vital market channel. These wholesalers often focus on distributing local, sustainably grown produce to institutions like schools, hospitals, and restaurants. By building relationships with wholesalers, farmers can expand their market reach and ensure a more stable income stream.

## RECOMMENDATION FOR PRIORITY AREA

Based on proximity maps, aquifer maps, soil maps and the current presence of young and beginning farmers, we recommend a focus be placed on southwestern Bastrop, eastern Caldwell and eastern Guadalupe counties. These areas sit generally within an hour of both Austin and San Antonio and have good soils. They are also located over the Carrizo-Wilcox aquifer, which is a strong underground water source, with near future projections of availability for farmers.<sup>17</sup>

Soils in this area are generally suitable for fruit and vegetable production, although not uniformly available. Each individual tract that might be under consideration for preservation will require additional analysis, however this further analysis is not difficult to do. The GIS mapping that has been completed and made available to the public<sup>18</sup> will allow for a quick view of the soil classifications for each property (as well as its proximity to underground water sources). The NRCS Web Soil Survey should be used to perform a deeper dive into a given property's suitability for the type of production a farmer would like to perform. As with any site location endeavor, these factors will need to be addressed and weighed against the characteristics of any target property. Although this recommendation is important when discussing regionality with land trusts and municipalities, it will be important to keep a "farm/farmer first" approach; identifying the farmer, what they will produce, how they will produce it, and where they will sell it, before assessing the suitability of any given tract for food production.

This area is not completely ideal however, as extreme weather conditions are still a concern for fruit and vegetable production in this region. Early and late freezes can lead to the risk of crop loss, especially when farming at a larger scale, as the use of season extending techniques are more difficult at a larger scale. Extreme heat and drought can also be a concern in this region, as they have been even more prevalent in recent years. As always, these factors can be mitigated through well-known farming practices being implemented by other producers in the area, however they should still be noted. These conditions can also be less of a factor for other types of farming, such as ruminant and poultry production, as well as nut bearing trees and other crops.

These issues decrease incrementally as the area of focus moves south, as freeze dates become more appropriate for fruit and vegetable production.<sup>19</sup> However, this lowers proximity to the Austin market and adds to delivery times and costs to serve them. Other weather concerns are slightly less problematic as the focus moves to the east, as annual precipitation increases<sup>20</sup> and temperatures mediate slightly. However, no place in Texas is immune to extreme weather - drought, flood, extreme heat and extreme cold.

The recommended Primary Area of Focus is the small area in Eastern Caldwell and Western Bastrop Counties in which the Carrizo-Wilcox aquifer extends underneath the Blackland Prairie ecoregion/soil

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.twdb.texas.gov/groundwater/aquifer/majors/carrizo-wilcox.asp>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.centraltxfoodsystem.org/food-production>

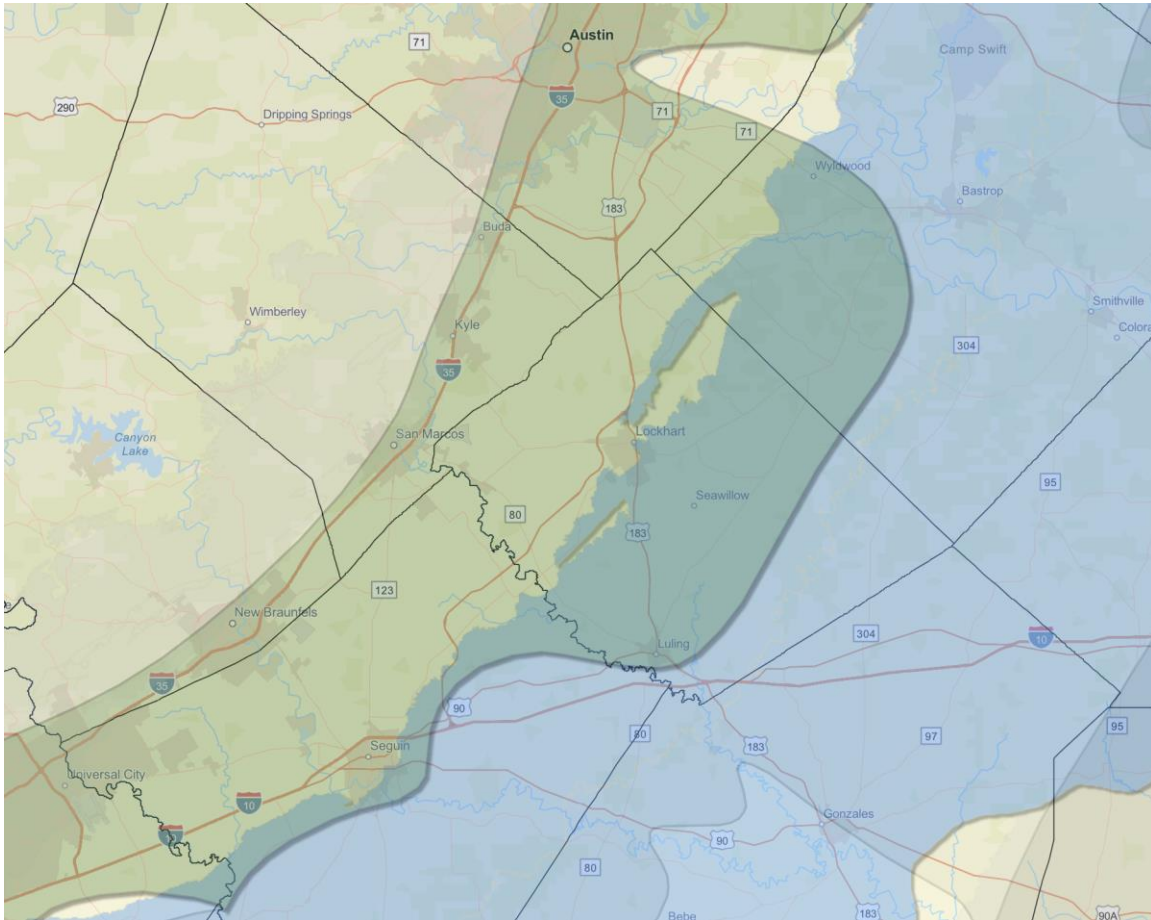
<sup>19</sup> [https://www.plantmaps.com/en/us/lf/state/texas/average-last-frost-dates-map#google\\_vignette](https://www.plantmaps.com/en/us/lf/state/texas/average-last-frost-dates-map#google_vignette)

<sup>20</sup> [https://learn.weatherstem.com/modules/learn/lessons/182/img/TX\\_E\\_150.jpg](https://learn.weatherstem.com/modules/learn/lessons/182/img/TX_E_150.jpg)



structure. This area is under significant development pressure and might already be too costly to save, however it will be a geography that should be watched for cooperative landowners or ideal property availability. Land prices in this area – as discussed in the Real Estate Assessment Section of this report – are significantly elevated due to pressures from development and sprawl from both Austin and San Antonio. This region was heavily affected by the construction of the Toll 130 highway, as it made it possible to access both Austin and San Antonio in under 45 minutes. Despite these headwinds, this area has the greatest potential for preservation of the most valuable farmland.

Blackland Prairie overlaps the Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer

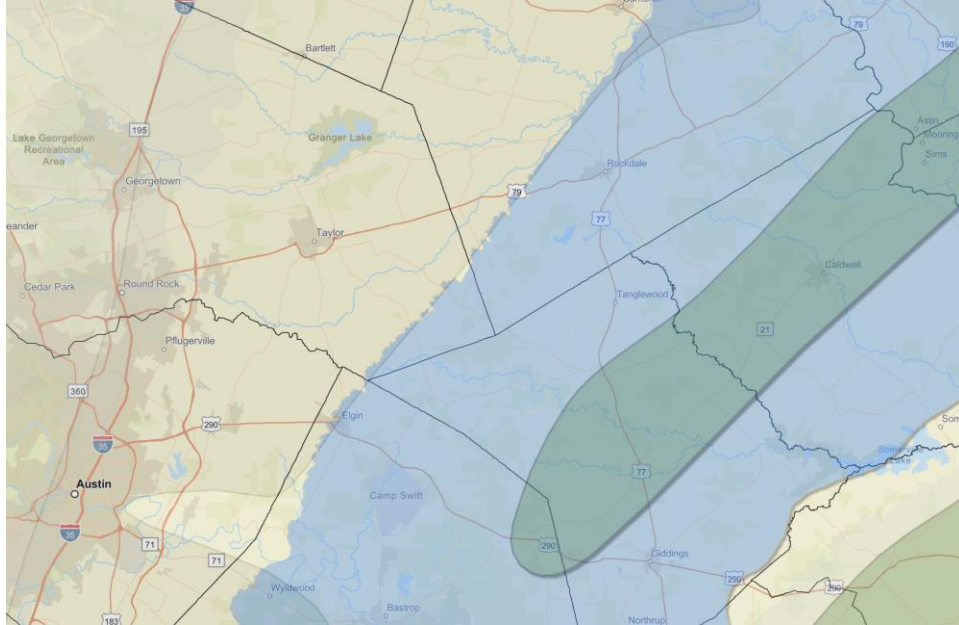


This recommendation includes an attempt to find land that could serve the Austin and San Antonio markets with the same level of ease. If, however, the focus was to shift to solely Austin, or solely San Antonio, that would make other areas equally or more attractive from a conservation standpoint. I would recommend that these areas be considered as Secondary Areas of Focus, as the land, soil and water characteristics are very similar to the Primary Area of Focus - they just don't provide the ability to serve multiple markets as easily.

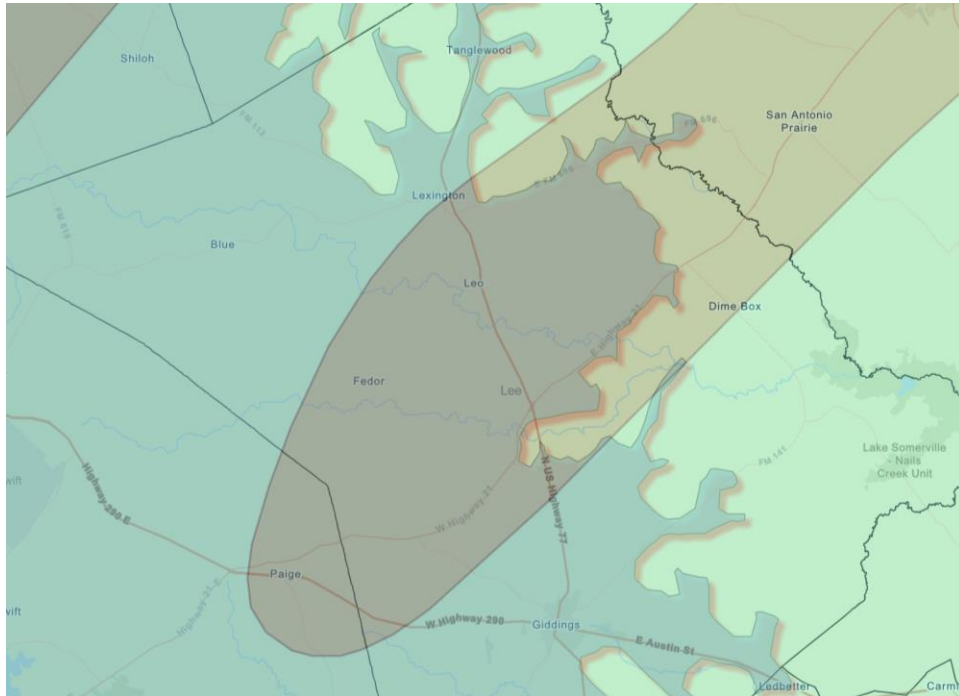
For example, Fayette and Lee Counties have areas where the southern part of the Texas Blackland Prairie ecoregion overlaps both the Carrizo-Wilcox and Coastal Plains aquifers but are over an hour and a half from San Antonio. Prices for farmland in these counties are lower than in the counties just to the

west - Caldwell, Bastrop and Williamson. Similarly, counties to the south of San Antonio have good soils, abundant ground water, and more temperate weather, however these counties are over an hour and a half from Austin.

Southern Blackland Prairie over Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer



Blackland Prairie Soils, Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer, Within 62 Miles of CTFB



## CONSERVATION AND EASEMENT POTENTIAL

Conservation easements are voluntary, legal agreements that permanently limit uses of the land to protect its conservation values. These easements allow landowners to continue to own and use their land, and to sell it or pass it on to heirs, while preventing non-agricultural development. Conservation involves the responsible management of natural resources to prevent exploitation, destruction, or neglect. Land trusts are nonprofit organizations that work with landowners to conserve land by acquiring land or conservation easements and by stewarding the land to ensure its ecological health.

### LAND TRUST ORGANIZATIONS IN CENTRAL TEXAS

According to Andrew Bowman of The Land Trust Alliance, there are 34 land trusts in Texas<sup>21</sup>. However, when it comes to agricultural land in Central Texas, the primary conservation partner is the Texas Agricultural Land Trust (TALT). Although TALT operates throughout Texas and technically includes Central Texas in its area of focus, they do not have a significant presence in this region. The other land trusts in Central Texas primarily aim to preserve open spaces, natural areas, and water quality, without a specific focus on protecting agricultural land or working lands.

An example of the general lack of focus on working lands comes from the findings of the Texas Hill Country Conservation Network in their Land, Water, Sky, and Natural Infrastructure Plan<sup>22</sup>. Their research, polling, and surveys determined that working lands should receive only a 10% weighting in determining areas of high conservation need. This was far behind water supply (26%), water quality (23%), climate resilience (22%), and wildlife habitat and connectivity (12%), and only slightly ahead of access to outdoors and nature (7%). Although this report focuses on the Hill Country rather than the more agriculturally focused areas east of I-35, it underscores the broader lack of public interest in preserving working lands in Central Texas.

### Texas Agricultural Land Trust (TALT)

The Texas Agricultural Land Trust (TALT) is the largest organization in Texas focused on the conservation of working agricultural lands. However, discussions with TALT have revealed challenges in finding a land trust partner focused on preserving small to medium-sized farms and ranches in Central Texas. TALT's board has set a minimum size for viable farms at 150 acres, largely because managing conservation easements on smaller tracts requires the same amount of capital and resources as larger tracts. This size threshold poses a problem for many Central Texas farms, which are often smaller.

Additionally, TALT has a backlog of properties to close on, with 28 properties in the queue for 2024 alone. Darren Clark, the COO and Director of Land Conservation at TALT, attributes the increased interest to successful conservation stories and improved messaging around the benefits of conservation

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<sup>21</sup> <https://landtrustalliance.org/land-trusts/gaining-ground/texas>

<sup>22</sup> <https://ourtxhillcountry.org/wp-content/uploads/Natural-Infrastructure-Plan-Digital.pdf>

easements. This growing interest provides optimism that a similar program focused on smaller working farms in Central Texas could generate significant interest among local landowners.

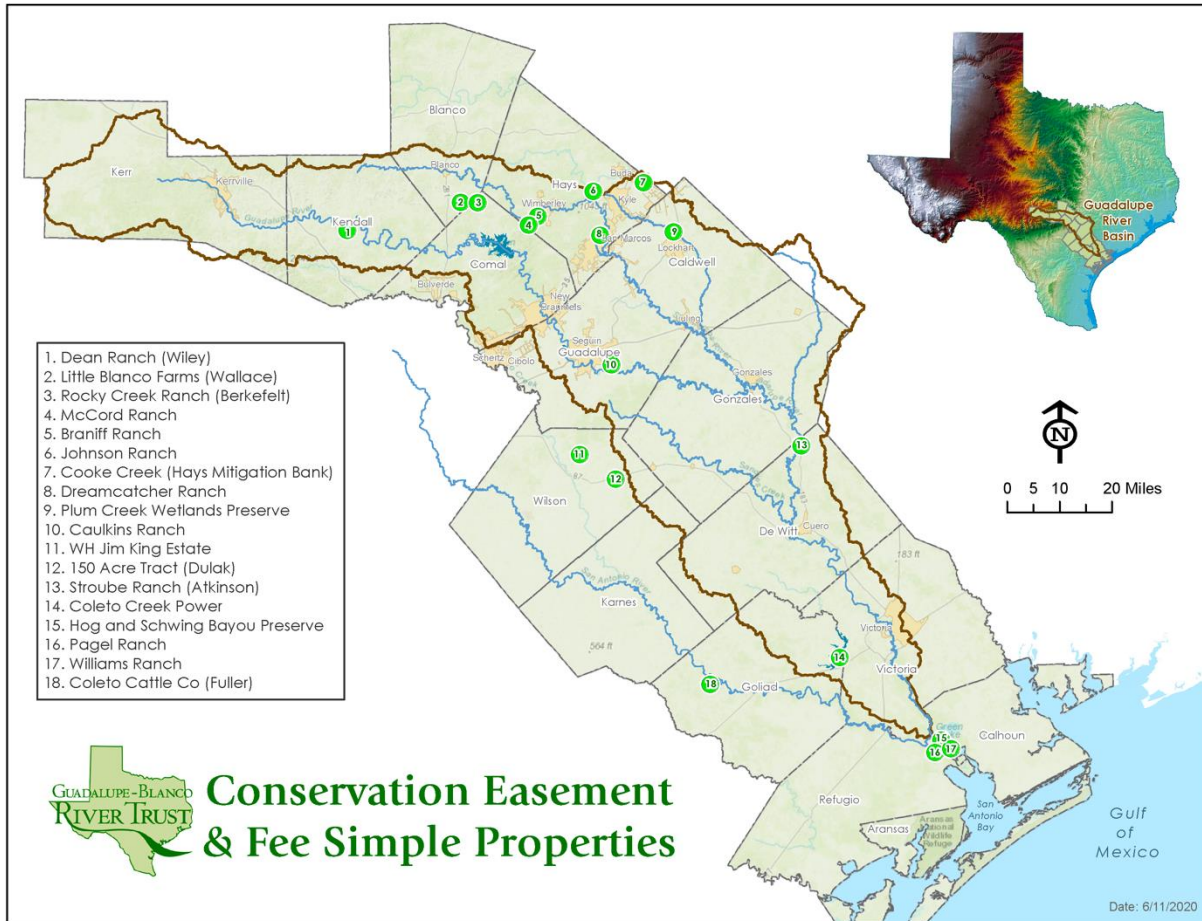
Despite understanding the rationale behind TALT's focus on larger properties, the issue of "death by a thousand cuts" in metro and suburban areas remains pressing. According to the 2022 Ag Census, Bastrop County alone has been losing around 42 acres of farmland per day, amounting to nearly 1,260 acres each month, or roughly two square miles of farmland lost monthly. This rate of loss underscores the urgent need for conservation efforts tailored to smaller parcels of agricultural land in Central Texas.

#### *A More Cooperative Approach*

Given that TALT does not work with small family farms and ranches, a cooperative approach involving multiple land trusts may be the best way forward. This approach could involve engaging a cohort of land trusts, each specializing in a portion of the region. Land trusts focusing on different watersheds within the region could align their efforts geographically and collaborate on shared conservation goals. Emphasizing the benefits of good farming practices for water quality, tributary preservation, and spring flow protection can help build partnerships and promote the conservation of working lands.

## Guadalupe-Blanco River Trust

The Guadalupe-Blanco River Trust works to preserve land within the Guadalupe and Blanco River watersheds. Although their primary focus is not on agricultural land conservation, they are open to developing programs that include working lands. Conversations with their Conservation and Stewardship Manager, Stephen Risinger, indicated a willingness to explore partnerships to promote working lands conservation as part of their mission. They already have a few farms and ranches in their portfolio, suggesting potential for collaboration on agricultural land preservation in Central Texas.



## Colorado River Land Trust

Similarly, the Colorado River Land Trust, which primarily holds easements on cattle ranching operations, expressed interest in working lands conservation. Development Manager Hope Boatright indicated that, although they do not have specific programming for working lands, they could potentially partner on conservation efforts in Bastrop and Fayette Counties. This trust's focus on the Colorado River basin aligns with the agricultural interests in the region, making them a valuable partner for farmland preservation.



### Wilbarger Creek Conservation Alliance

The Wilbarger Creek Conservation Alliance, founded to preserve properties in northwest Bastrop County, currently lacks the capacity to take on new easements. However, co-founder Anne Brockenbrough expressed openness to fundraising efforts that could support hiring staff and expanding their focus. With sufficient support, the alliance could extend its conservation efforts to include agricultural lands in Bastrop County and potentially into Williamson and Milam Counties.

### The City of Austin and Travis County

Both the City of Austin and Travis County have been active in securing conservation easements, primarily related to water quality and open space preservation. Travis County is expanding its efforts to include working lands, with plans to place an easement on Coyote Creek Feed Mill and Jeremiah Cunningham’s World’s Greatest Eggs in eastern Travis County. Although funding is limited and requires voter approval through municipal bonds, these local government entities could play strategic roles in farmland preservation efforts.

### *One Additional Option*

An alternative, albeit complex, option would be to establish a sister organization to TALT with a specific focus on smaller working lands. This approach would involve significant effort and resources but could

provide a dedicated mechanism for preserving smaller agricultural properties in Central Texas. This "build it" or "buy it" scenario highlights the need for creative solutions to address the unique challenges of conserving small to medium-sized farms and ranches in the region.

## CONSERVATION APPRAISERS IN CENTRAL TEXAS

Similar to land trusts, the landscape of conservation easement appraisers does not have many appraisers of small, working lands transactions in its ranks. Jim Jeffries of Jeffries Appraisal Services, as well as Wendell Wood of Kokel-Oberrender-Wood Appraisal, both based out of Georgetown, Texas, are deeply involved in land conservation through the use of easements, however, were unable to provide an estimate as to the cost of an easement appraisal for working lands. Both expressed concerns about their ability to provide an accurate value of the development rights for a smaller tract of working land, so close to a city. In fact, when asked about Greengate Farm and the property previously operated as Johnson's Backyard Garden, Mr. Jeffries replied,

*"...Both referenced properties are operating farms which might, very well, require knowledge and appreciation of the extensive income producing capabilities of each property. While I certainly believe I am qualified to evaluate the land in each instance, the farming operation is a different specialty in which I have no experience. As you know, the valuation for a conservation easement takes the form of "before" and "after" appraisals and the "before" appraisal with the important ingredient of Highest and Best Use causes me some consternation for these two highly improved properties that you have referenced.*

*I could throw out some numbers of what it would likely cost to get them appraised, but, again, I am not sure I am the right choice to do a credible job of understanding the "before" value of each."*

This demonstrates a lack of expertise in our region with regards to dealing with conservation easements on smaller working lands. Most appraisers are used to working on easements for native or open-space lands, where the value is strictly based on the land and does not consider the value of any production that might come off of it, or necessary infrastructure required to operate a working farm or ranch.

Similarly, the appraisers that work with the Texas Agricultural Land Trust do not work with tracts under 150 acres and are typically working with properties in more rural settings. This proves to be an issue, as the value of a conservation easement is a reflection of the difference between the "highest and best use" and the "limited use" available under the covenants of the easement<sup>23</sup>. When dealing with properties that are closer to metro areas, the values determined as "highest and best use" must take into account market pressures from subdivision developers, commercial real estate developers and the path of a metro area's growth. These issues are less of a concern when dealing with the valuation of rural lands, as those pressures are lower - if not non-existent.

Travis County has worked with members of the Aegis Group, as well as Paul Hornsby of Hornsby Appraisers and Consultants, for some of their acquisition and easement projects in the past. Debra Scott, Travis County's Environmental Project Manager, and primary point of contact for conservation easements for the county, considers "Travis County has used Aegis and Paul Hornsby for appraisals on

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<sup>23</sup> [https://texaslandtrustcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/CEguidebook\\_2018\\_small.pdf](https://texaslandtrustcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/CEguidebook_2018_small.pdf)

acquisitions and easements. None of them have been for small working farms. They have done easement work on small parcels for inclusion in the BCP and on moderately sized to large land tracts for ranching. I can't imagine it being that different for small farms.”

In general, the appraisal of small to medium-sized farms and ranches is proving to be a real niche. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be a robust provider network readily available in Central Texas. However, there are a handful of potential partners in the region that could provide the services required to operate a “Buy, Protect, Sell” program. Much like the potential land trust partners previously listed, with some cooperation and patience it can be done well.



## STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

As with any initiative of any amount of relevance, the issue of farmland preservation and farmland access in Central Texas has its fair share of obstacles to overcome. However, unlike some issues faced in our region, there appears to be a strong and cooperative interest in solving it. From landowners, to farmers, to consumers, to policy makers and everyone in-between, it is hard to find anyone who does not support the idea of conserving the land that grows our food. There are even some examples of similar conservation efforts that have achieved great success in this part of Texas before – look at the success of the Save Our Springs Alliance<sup>24</sup> and its efforts to fight development and champion conservation in the 90's.

We cannot leave this discussion in the hands of the establishment any longer, real investment in the future of working lands in Texas need to be a partnership between farmers, local government, non-profits and conservation professionals. Our recommendations for a path forward begin and end with collaboration and ongoing investment in these strategies.

### IMPLEMENT THE WORKING FARMS FUND

To bring the Working Farms Fund to Central Texas, a comprehensive campaign is necessary. This campaign should aim to raise sufficient funds to support the acquisition, leasing, and eventual sale of farmland to new and socially disadvantaged farmers. The following steps outline the process required for successful implementation:

- **Capital Campaign:** Launch a fundraising initiative targeting private donors, philanthropic organizations, and government grants to secure an initial capital injection of \$5 million. This capital will serve as a revolving fund for land purchases, conservation easements, and operational costs.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Engage local stakeholders, including land trusts, agricultural organizations, and community groups, to build a coalition supporting the Working Farms Fund. Collaboration with entities like the Texas Agricultural Land Trust (TALT), the Guadalupe-Blanco River Trust, and the Colorado River Land Trust will be crucial for securing conservation easements and managing preserved lands.
- **Policy Advocacy:** Advocate for supportive policies at the state and local levels to facilitate the establishment and operation of the Working Farms Fund. This includes pushing for tax incentives for land donations, streamlined processes for conservation easements, and increased funding for farmland preservation initiatives.
- **Marketing and Outreach:** Develop a robust marketing and outreach strategy to raise awareness about the Working Farms Fund and its benefits. This strategy should include targeted

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.sosalliance.org/>

communications to potential donors, educational campaigns to inform the public about the importance of farmland preservation, and outreach to potential farmer beneficiaries.

- **Operational Framework:** Establish an operational framework for the Working Farms Fund, detailing procedures for land acquisition, leasing terms, conservation easement placements, and eventual land sales. This framework should prioritize transparency, equity, and sustainability to ensure the fund's long-term success.

## EXPAND LAND ACCESS SUPPORT

In addition to the Working Farms Fund, expanding auxiliary support mechanisms is essential for improving land access in Central Texas:

- **Land Link Programs:** Develop and promote land link programs that connect retiring farmers with new and beginning farmers. These programs facilitate the transfer of land and knowledge, ensuring the continuity of agricultural operations and supporting the next generation of farmers.
- **Strengthen Land Trusts:** Support the growth and capacity of existing land trusts in Central Texas, such as the Texas Agricultural Land Trust, Guadalupe-Blanco River Trust, and Colorado River Land Trust. Providing resources for these organizations to take on more agricultural easements and manage smaller parcels can enhance their impact on farmland preservation.
- **Technical Assistance:** Offer technical assistance to farmers, including training in sustainable agriculture practices, financial planning, and navigating the conservation easement process. Partnering with agricultural extension services and nonprofit organizations can provide the necessary support and resources.

## POLICY AND ADVOCACY

Effective policy advocacy is vital for creating a supportive environment for farmland preservation and land access initiatives:

- **State Level:** Advocate for state policies that increase funding for conservation easements, streamline the process for establishing easements, and provide tax incentives for land conservation. Support efforts to simplify tax codes and facilitate the transfer of farmland to new and beginning farmers.
- **Local Level:** Promote local policies that create capital for land preservation, such as municipal bonds and public-private partnerships. Encourage local governments to incorporate farmland preservation into their planning and development frameworks. Engage farmers as the best advocates for themselves. Continue prioritizing outreach to and from black, indigenous, queer and women-owned farms, expanding the traditional definition of underserved, by continually listening to farmers and providing spaces for proven community solutions to succeed.

- Federal Level: Support ongoing federal initiatives that enhance land access, such as the USDA’s Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. Advocate for continued funding and policy support for programs that assist socially disadvantaged farmers.

## NECESSARY RESOURCES

- On-the-Ground Leadership: The success of the any program aimed at preserving farmland requires dedicated leadership. Even if the Working Farms Fund chooses to expand to Central Texas, establishing an on-the-ground director to oversee the cooperative operations, coordinate with partners, and drive advocacy efforts is crucial for maintaining momentum and achieving long-term goals. While there is no shortage of people and organizations around Central Texas that openly support farmland preservation and farmland access, success will require the pulling together of these various groups, interested parties, and partner organizations.
- Initial Capital Injection: An initial capital injection of \$5 million is necessary to establish a revolving fund for land acquisitions and conservation easements. This investment will provide the financial foundation needed to begin preserving farmland and supporting new farmers in Central Texas. With this initial funding, the WFF can immediately begin seeking land, alongside a farm, which is not only at deep risk for development, but would serve to fill a much-needed gap in the local food supply. In the first two years the WFF seeks to purchase and lease 5 farms, protecting 200 acres of land.
- Community Engagement and Advocacy: The final element to the success of such a movement is engagement and support from the local community. While not the only path to success, a high level of support and engagement from the local community can heighten awareness of the topic, put more focus on the issues we face and catch the attention of elected officials. The peak of this pyramid is where the consumer sits – be it individual households, celebrity chefs or institutional buyers – they have the power to affect change “upstream” from them, from production to policy. Developing a comprehensive campaign strategy is essential for securing support and funding. This strategy should include targeted outreach to donors, policymakers, and public education efforts to highlight the importance of farmland preservation and the benefits of the Working Farms Fund.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is the result of a collaborative effort between SFC staff, Jarred Maxwell of Foodshed Investors, Krisztian Varsa of Working Farms Fund, and various contributors at Texas Ag Extension, aligned non-profits, and conversations with farmers. We believe that change must always begin in the community and the feedback and guidance we have received from farmers in developing these recommendations is key for moving forward.