

An aerial photograph of a river winding through a lush green forest. Several people are seen tubing down the river, some in groups and some alone. The water is a deep teal color, and the surrounding trees are vibrant green.

TEXAS LIVING WATERS STRATEGIC PLAN

2023-2027



**TEXAS
LIVING
WATERS**

Water for Every Living Thing



TEXAS LIVING WATERS

Priority Goals for 2023-2027

- Goal 1: Elevate efficient water management practices
- Goal 2: Promote resilient and equitable infrastructure investment
- Goal 3: Advance One Water practices
- Goal 4: Support healthy river ecosystems
- Goal 5: Launch the TLW Water Policy and Advocacy Hub
- Goal 6: Strengthen TLW's systems and grow the partnership

Texas Living Waters is a collaboration of conservation groups working to ensure Texas has the water it needs for thriving communities and abundant fish and wildlife.

TEXAS LIVING WATERS STRATEGIC PLAN (2023-2027)

VISION

Ensure that Texas has the water it needs for thriving communities and healthy fish and wildlife.

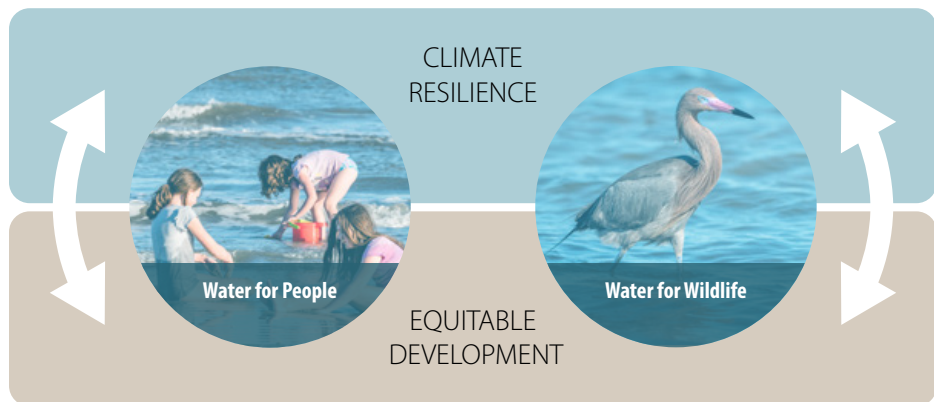
MISSION

Working together to advance enduring water solutions that support people and wildlife across Texas by amplifying partners' collective strengths in education, outreach, science, and advocacy—in the face of climate change, rapid population growth, and economic development.

North Stars

To move towards accomplishing our vision, Texas Living Waters' (TLW) work is guided by three principles:

- 1 Conservation and efficiency.** We work to ensure that water in Texas is conserved and used efficiently, and that new water supplies are safe and protective of human health and the environment.
- 2 Equitable access.** We advocate for policies, investments, institutions, and planning that allow for under-resourced communities to participate in decision-making and benefit from financial and technical support.
- 3 Resilient communities and ecosystems.** We strive for water management frameworks and solutions that balance the needs of people, wildlife, and the environment both today and into the future, even in the face of climate change, rapid population growth, and economic development.



Selected Successes Under the 2019- 2023 Strategic Plan

- Highlighting opportunities for “new” water supply by reducing water loss in distribution through a groundbreaking analysis of statewide water loss “Hidden Reservoirs: Addressing Water Loss in Texas” and a first-ever national blueprint for integrating water reuse into affordable housing development, “Opportunities for Realizing Water Reuse in Affordable Housing.”
- Connecting rural communities to real, implementable solutions to integrated water planning by publishing a guidebook and list of resources and contacts in “One Water in the Texas Hill Country: Connecting Communities with Projects and Professionals.”
- Improving Texas Water Development Board’s approach to water planning and outreach to affected communities by successfully advocating to add climate change and droughts worse than drought of record into agency processes through Sunset legislation.
- Setting the stage for revitalizing the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality’s (TCEQ) adaptive management process for environmental flow protection using the Sunset Commission process.
- Drawing attention to impediments and solutions to environmental water transactions in “A Winning Trade: How Water Markets Can Benefit Texans and the Environment.”

ORGANIZATIONS CURRENTLY PARTICIPATING IN THE TLW COLLABORATION



Texas Living Waters: A Brief History

Texas Living Waters got its start in 2001 when the state was developing a new 50-year State Water Plan to meet the water supply needs of a rapidly growing population. The plan envisioned development of numerous large new reservoirs, including only minimal provisions for water conservation and almost no attention to the water needs of fish and wildlife or their habitats. Key conservation organizations—led by the National Wildlife Federation in collaboration with the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club and Galveston Bay Foundation—rallied to champion water conservation and water for wildlife and habitat.

Through research, advocacy, education, and outreach, TLW has succeeded in improving water policy, planning, and management in Texas. Water conservation is now viewed as a serious, cost-effective water supply strategy. Prospects for ensuring adequate water flows in Texas rivers, bays, and estuaries to support healthy fish and wildlife populations have also improved. TLW has supported public and policymaker education initiatives, worked to protect Texas' iconic springs, advanced implementation of the Senate Bill 3 (2007) environmental flows protection process, and pursued precedent-setting legal action. TLW celebrates this important progress!

And the work is not done. Climate change impacts threaten Texas' water future in ways ranging from intensified flooding to drought conditions worse than historical droughts accompanied by increasingly unpredictable patterns of rainfall and higher rates of evaporation. Meanwhile, Texas' population of 30 million people is projected to grow by more than 15 million people by 2050, with surging economic growth in parallel from West Texas to the I-35 corridor to the Gulf Coast. And yet Texas' water infrastructure is falling farther and farther behind.

Major investments are needed to ensure clean, safe water, and to adequately plan for and implement water conservation for current and future generations. These contextual factors will create real pressures on water in Texas. In response, TLW is broadening and deepening its collaborative work to ensure water for people and wildlife into the future.

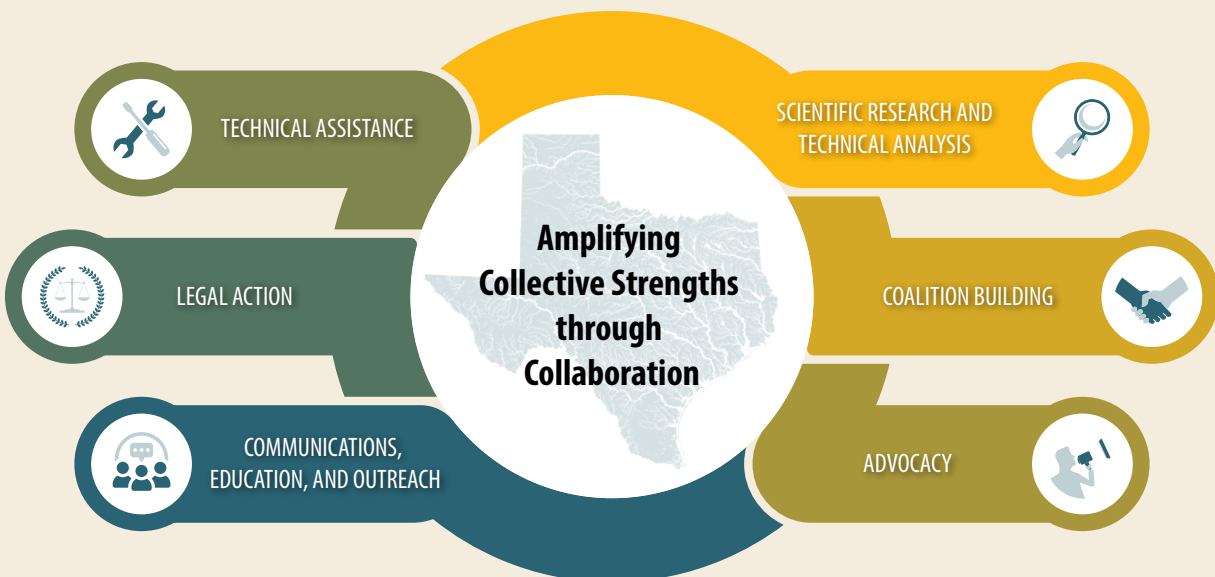
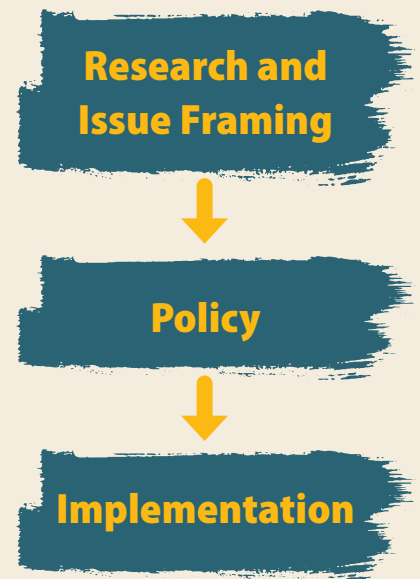
TLW: From Project to Collaboration Platform

What began as a discrete project has evolved into a broader collaboration. TLW has expanded to include major state-wide and regionally focused organizations working to ensure Texas stewards its water resources to support thriving communities and healthy wildlife populations. These organizations work together in common and differentiated ways to bring their collective leadership, voice, and capacities to advance the TLW vision. Organizations participating in the collaboration recognize that they can achieve greater impact working together than on their own. This belief extends to support growing efforts to work in more intentional ways with organizations beyond TLW.

HOW TLW WORKS

TLW works collaboratively and strategically to advance action towards the vision and goals in this plan. This action process often involves work to research, characterize, and frame issues in ways that build the awareness, understanding, knowledge, and political will across a broad spectrum of interests to address them. It entails work to advocate for and support the policy, regulatory, legal, and procedural frameworks and systems needed to advance solutions. And it involves work on the ground across Texas to implement practical and effective solutions that benefit communities and wildlife. **A key strength of TLW is the breadth of its partner organizations, connecting the work from the local level all the way up to legislators and programs at the state and federal level.** Organizations collaborating in TLW use a range of tactics to support this action process, including:

- **Scientific Research and Technical Analysis.** Conduct scientific research and analysis to better define issues and support decision-making with sound data and evidence.
- **Communications, Education, and Outreach.** Connect key stakeholders and the public, including membership and leadership of our organizations, with information about critical water issues and solutions so they can develop approaches appropriate for their communities and participate effectively in decision-making processes, while also building a strong culture of water stewardship across Texas.
- **Coalition Building.** Work in close partnership with diverse organizations and stakeholders to support research, advocacy, outreach, and implementation around specific issues and solutions.
- **Advocacy.** Advocate for state and local policies, regulations, and practices in a broad range of venues, and educate policymakers and advocates about water policy issues and options.
- **Legal Action.** Use legal tactics to ensure policies and regulations are implemented as intended by state policymakers.
- **Technical Assistance.** Provide technical support and expertise to communities, organizations, and institutions to implement solutions to their water challenges.



PRIORITY GOALS FOR 2023-2027

The TLW partners analyzed the landscape of Texas water issues and policy, reviewed TLW's past accomplishments, strengths, and challenges, and developed this plan to guide the collaboration's strategy and activities over the next four years. Our strategic plan identifies six priority goals that define "what" progress TLW seeks to advance on water for people and wildlife in Texas and "how" we aim to contribute to that progress as a collaboration. The goals and supporting objectives include:

Goal 1: Elevate Efficient Water Management Practices

Advance the prioritization of water conservation and efficiency, the shoring up of impaired infrastructure to mitigate water loss, and drought response planning, as the first strategies for addressing Texas' stressed water supply at local, regional, and state levels, even as other innovative strategies are explored.

Ensuring adequate water supply will become an even greater challenge for Texas as population and economic growth continues to surge and as climate change impacts intensify. We have viable and cost-effective solutions to these water supply challenges, and it is important that the state invests in and supports structures to deploy these solutions. Solutions include implementing water conservation and efficiency measures, repairing inadequate and aging infrastructure, and deploying innovative technology and other solutions that will increase water supply reliability and resilience. For example, Texas is losing 572,000 acre-feet of water per year through leaking and deteriorating infrastructure, enough water to meet the annual needs of Austin, Fort Worth, El Paso, Lubbock, and Laredo combined. With effective advocacy, planning, and investment, more than half of the water that is being lost could be recovered through cost-effective strategies that ensure water is reaching its intended destinations. These solutions need to be deployed at scale and embedded in water supply planning and implementation at the local and state level across all economic sectors—from industrial to agriculture to residential—to have the needed impact. Water availability, affordability, resilience and reliability, and environmental impact are all factors that must be considered when developing water solutions. TLW understands the interplay between policy development and implementation and seeks to institutionalize management and investment that sets Texas on a sustainable path.

Objective 1.1: Support water utilities in making informed management decisions that support the best water conservation practices and create programs that promote equitable water conservation incentives and practices that are easily accessible by all communities, particularly those in lower-wealth areas.

Objective 1.2: Support groundwater conservation districts in making informed management decisions through the development and utilization of science that supports rule development, groundwater management plans, and implementation of technologies and conservation practices that reduce water use.

Objective 1.3: Support state and federal policy to increase funding for agricultural conservation programs and assist producers in accessing technology and financing to implement water and soil conservation practices that provide water quantity and quality benefits.

Objective 1.4: Support industrial water conservation and reuse to reduce overall water demand and to limit the need for the increased use of expensive and energy-intensive water supply development.

Objective 1.5: Advocate for implementation of improved land use codes, development and building codes, as well as building retrofit programs, at the state and local level to reduce water use.

Goal 2: Promote Resilient and Equitable Infrastructure Investment

Advance understanding, planning for, funding, and implementation of equitable infrastructure solutions – including nature-based infrastructure – to address disproportionate impacts of flooding, drought, and water stress, and to support communities' resilience goals.

Numerous federal and state funding programs, such as the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), and the Texas Flood Infrastructure Fund are available for clean water, drinking water, and flood infrastructure in Texas. Further, new state funding programs, like the Texas Water Fund (SB 28) passed in the 88th Legislature along with increased levels of funding for existing programs, will likely result in billions of dollars of additional infrastructure funds to Texas. However, substantial work is needed to develop effective rules, processes, and implementation supports to ensure investment flow to communities in ways that enable equitable development and resilient outcomes. As communities in Texas continue to lack basic water infrastructure, and the use of nature-based solutions and natural infrastructure necessary to protect wildlife and communities in the face of climate change falls short, TLW will work to improve administration of and access to these critical programs.

Objective 2.1: Educate policymakers and communities about available state and federal funding programs, how to access and secure that funding, and assist those communities in applying where possible, while consistently highlighting good projects as examples to other communities, practitioners, decision-makers, and the media.

Objective 2.2: Inform and build the capacity of community leaders by leveraging existing partnerships and developing new connections to various advocacy organizations to strengthen policy recommendations and advocate for and secure investments in baseline infrastructure needs and nature-based solutions, where appropriate and supported by community input.

Objective 2.3: Improve the statutory, administrative and practitioner environment through research, advocacy, and education to prioritize resilient, innovative, and nature-based solutions to address flooding, drought, and associated water supply and water quality strategies.





One Water

One Water is a holistic approach to water management with a focus on making every drop count. One Water focuses on designing and building water systems with local water and water stressors in mind, considering drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater together. One Water aims to ensure water is here for people and the environment—today and for generations to come. One Water plans should be informed and led by the community members that will implement and live with the plan. The strategies should be designed with equity and affordability in mind, be reflective of community values, and anticipate climate change impacts. The result is a long-range local water plan that yields multiple benefits and utilizes innovative, reliable, and adaptive strategies to meet community water needs.

Goal 3: Advance One Water Practices

Advance One Water practices across Texas to enhance community resilience and conserve water resources for future generations.

A growing population and increasing incidence of severe drought due to climate change means that our water resources will feel more pressure than ever before. Several Texas cities and communities—including Austin and Houston—are developing and adopting One Water approaches to managing water resources in integrated ways. Continued work is needed to support these communities on their One Water journeys, to remove regulatory and other barriers to integrated water management, and to support diffusion of these innovative approaches to other interested Texas communities. By using a One Water planning approach, with a focus on achieving multiple benefits and equitable outcomes, water resources can be used together—efficiently and effectively—leaving more water for the environment, human health, and future generations.

Objective 3.1: Promote One Water practices in Texas by educating communities and decision-makers about the benefits of a One Water approach and help facilitate the development of projects in Texas that serve as examples of One Water in action.

Objective 3.2: Advance enabling conditions supporting One Water expansion across Texas by increasing funding for One Water projects—through both policy interventions and innovative partnerships—and removing regulatory impediments to holistic integrated water management strategies at the state level.

Objective 3.3: Partner with the City of Houston and local community-based organizations to develop a forward-looking, community-driven, and ecologically-sound One Water plan in Houston that is grounded in equity and enhances the region's water-related resilience.

Objective 3.4: Ensure that Austin continues to be a statewide leader in One Water planning and implementation, with a strong emphasis on equity, inclusion, the environment, and access to water resources.

Goal 4: Support Healthy River Ecosystems

Advance environmental flow protection by facilitating water transactions and improving regulatory approaches to water planning and management to maintain water quality and ensure water availability for wildlife in Texas springs, rivers, and bays. Prioritize efforts can also benefit downstream communities and economies.

The health of Texas' streams, rivers, and bays is at serious risk from flow depletion in the absence of effective flow protections. The current and future challenges associated with freshwater scarcity in Texas will require new and innovative approaches in water resources management, and it is essential that these strategies consider human and environmental needs, with special emphasis on downstream habitat, communities, and economies. Environmental water transactions cover a broad spectrum of water management approaches for moving water from consumptive use to flow protection that are receiving increased attention across Texas, and more work is needed to support efficient and scaled use of this approach. Because most of the water in many Texas river basins is already allocated with little consideration of environmental water needs, it is also critically important to participate in water permitting and other planning and decision-making activities across the state to ensure the health of our springs, rivers, bays, wildlife, and the people relying on them.

Objective 4.1: Prioritize high conservation value water rights held by individuals or other actors for conservation agreements, including acquisition through sale, donation, or long-term lease by utilizing identified transaction funding sources, and by working with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and Texas Water Development Board through the Texas Water Trust, to facilitate the transfer and management of surface and groundwater rights for environmental flow protection.

Objective 4.2: Ensure regional and state plans related to water supply, flooding, hazard mitigation, and coastal resources include protection of water for the environment as a priority and point to specific strategies, including environmental water transactions, for advancing flow protection.

Objective 4.3: Continue strategic participation in important regulatory and decision-making venues like agency rulemaking, water rights permitting, and Endangered Species Act processes affecting Texas aquatic species, to establish sound precedents, ensure effective implementation of Texas' environmental flow standards, and provide for meaningful commitments to protection of springs and surface flows.

Objective 4.4: Build on the 2023 TCEQ Sunset review process to revitalize the adaptive management component of the Senate Bill 3 (2007) environmental flows process, emphasizing the strengthening of key aspects of current flow standards, identification of proactive flow protection strategies, and filling vacancies on environmental flows stakeholder and science committees.

Objective 4.5: Assess proposals for new water supply using state funding approved by the Texas Legislature in 2023 (Senate Bill 28) and engage in appropriate decision-making venues to ensure that the proposals and any resulting projects and activities are developed with strong environmental flow and water quality protections for nearby communities and wildlife.

Objective 4.6: Advance understanding of the value of water among broad stakeholder groups, including policymakers, acknowledging the historical, current, and future sociocultural, environmental, and economic values that water provides to different communities, to inform decision-making around water resources management.

Environmental Water Transactions

Environmental water transactions can include any arrangement whereby a water user or manager (irrigator, industrial, municipal, etc.) reduces or changes the timing of their water use to leave water instream or within an aquifer to benefit the environment, which may also benefit water security for downstream communities. These transactions can include direct leases or purchases of water rights, donations, forbearance agreements, changes in reservoir management, or conservation easements where groundwater use is encumbered.



Goal 5: Launch the TLW Water Policy and Advocacy Hub

Work to build a more inclusive and powerful water policy and advocacy community across Texas.

TLW has set this stretch goal to raise funding to build and launch the Water Policy and Advocacy Hub. This hub is designed to fill key gaps in Texas. Productive coordination and collaborative advocacy by TLW partners around the 2023 Texas state legislative session demonstrated the value and impact of aligned messaging, coordinated outreach, and strategic advocacy to advance water policy issues. This coordinated approach will cover a wide range of water policy issues across multiple venues (including and beyond the state legislature) and will seek to engage a much broader array of organizations and Texans. TLW seeks to bring more stakeholders representing smaller and historically under-resourced entities, such as smaller water utilities, cities and counties, community-based organizations, businesses, and others, into important policy conversations around water that are most important to them. The hub will also work to ensure that water policy is easily accessible and understandable, and that all Texans are supported to act as water policy advocates. TLW will promote the hub, provide its content, track engagement with it, and adapt it to meet the needs of its users.

Objective 5.1: Conduct a regular process to develop a shared water policy and advocacy agenda and coordination plan among TLW partners, informed by engagement with a broader array of stakeholders and community-based organizations and building on insights from recent TLW water policy coordination activities.

Objective 5.2: Identify potential partner organizations to engage through the hub, including community-based organizations and partners in disadvantaged and underrepresented communities across Texas, and survey them on their needs, areas of interest, barriers to engagement, and the specific accommodations and support that could enable their engagement in Texas water issues to inform the hub's activities.

Objective 5.3: Expand the TLW website to host a one-stop-shop online hub that features a broad range of information and advocacy resources to support organizations and individuals to engage on water policy and advocacy issues in Texas.

Objective 5.4: Engage a wide group of organizations and interested individual advocates around relevant water policy issue areas in ways that: (1) build broader advocacy capacity beyond TLW through training workshops and other approaches, (2) align messages and coordinate action across the broader NGO water sector, (3) enable rapid mobilization of advocates around specific issues, comment and rule-making opportunities, needs, and other opportunities.





Goal 6: Strengthen TLW's Systems and Grow the Partnership

Strengthen the governance and operational systems of TLW to support growth and enhanced collaboration and impact.

As TLW has evolved from a project of several organizations into a more powerful collaboration platform, updates are also needed to TLW's governance and operational systems. TLW is continuing to evolve its agreements, systems, and processes to enable participating organizations to work together in efficient and productive ways. TLW is also committed to growing participation in the collaboration, broadening the collaboration's issue coverage and expertise, its geographic focus within Texas, and its engagement of more diverse organizations and water advocacy leaders. While the Water Policy and Advocacy Hub outlined in Goal 5 offers a powerful mechanism for TLW to connect with a much larger and more diverse field of water advocates, TLW is also interested to grow participation in the core TLW collaboration in thoughtful and productive ways.

Objective 6.1: Clarify and update TLW's governance and operational systems, including partner expectations and roles, decision-making approaches, budgeting and resource management, fundraising, and implementation coordination processes to strengthen the collaboration.

Objective 6.2: Cultivate a shared leadership model that builds on National Wildlife Federation's secretariat role in TLW and that leverages distributed leaders and leadership across the partner organizations to expand the influence and advocacy power of TLW.

Objective 6.3: Develop a clear and transparent criteria and process for adding new partners to TLW and pursue opportunities to add new partners that will complement and strengthen the topical and geographic coverage and influence of TLW.



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