

The Nature Conservancy In Partnership With Hays County Will Acquire over 530 Acres of El Rancho Cima

With a majority vote by the Hays County Commissioners Court, [The Nature Conservancy](#), in partnership with Hays County, is now free to move forward with a planned acquisition of more than 530 acres of the historic El Rancho Cima. The acquisition is slated to officially close on November 22 and represents a \$13 million effort to safeguard an iconic piece of the Texas Hill Country.

In recent years, Texas has experienced a rise in population and development at a quicker clip than that of any other state, and the pace shows no signs of slowing. The state's population is expected to more than double—to 55 million people—by 2050, putting enormous pressure on our natural resources and leading to an increase in land fragmentation, one of the most acute threats to habitat and wildlife conservation today. Hays County, in particular, is one of the fastest growing and subdividing areas in not just the state but in the entire nation, making land and water protection in the region a significant priority for Texas conservationists.

“In partnering with Hays County to protect this property, we have a rare opportunity to simultaneously safeguard this iconic piece of our state's history and culture while meeting conservation goals and increasing the possibility of public access to nature in the fast-changing Texas Hill Country,” said Laura Huffman, Regional Director of The Nature Conservancy in Texas. “And the credit really goes to Lon Shell and the rest of the Commissioners Court for their leadership and support of this project from the get-go. Collaborative land conservation deals like this are the only way to protect the nature we have left in a way that benefits both people and the environment.”

“Hays County appreciates once again collaborating with The Nature Conservancy in Texas to help safeguard our natural lands, which are quickly disappearing in our fast-growing county,” Precinct 3 Commissioner Lon Shell said, noting that a previous collaboration with the conservancy resulted in the creation of Jacob's Well Natural Area. “We are excited about this project because it provides a rare opportunity for Hays County to create a preserve that can be used for environmental mitigation related to transportation infrastructure improvements and also conserve a natural area that will benefit the public for generations to come.”

This area of Central Texas supports a number of wildlife, aquatic and rare plant species that are threatened by accelerating development. The acreage TNC will be acquiring has been specifically identified as habitat for the federally endangered golden-cheeked warbler.

On top of the property's ecological importance, it's also one that the public has long wanted to see protected. The property was previously owned by the Sam Houston Area Council of the Boy Scouts of America, who operated it as part of their historic El Rancho Cima camp for more than 60 years. Scouts from across the Texas came to this property, hiked in its hills and swam along the shores of the Blanco River that runs through it.

“Our goal is to balance preserving the environmental aspects of El Rancho Cima with the public's desire to enjoy it,” Shell said. “We are working on a plan to allow limited access, preserve the warbler habitat during breeding season, and develop and maintain trails and access to the Blanco River for the public to enjoy.”

“Because of its rich history as a camp, folks from across the state and even the country have incredibly strong personal connections to the land here—and while we haven't saved the entire camp, we've saved the part of it where both Scouts and outdoor-loving Texans have created some of their strongest memories,” said Huffman. “Protecting this land not only contributes to Hays County's capacity to provide public parkland but ensures that future generations are provided the same opportunities to connect with nature in the Texas Hill Country.”

The tract is situated 18 miles west of San Marcos along the Devil's Backbone and includes frontage on both sides of the Blanco River.

The new acquisition is funded in part by Hays County, which will be contributing \$7 million at closing using bond money set aside for environmental mitigation, including golden-cheeked warbler habitat protection. The Nature Conservancy will pay the remainder of the purchase price and will retain temporary ownership of the property. Hays County plans to eventually purchase the property at The Nature Conservancy's cost and operate it as a public park and preserve—the Nature Conservancy will continue to hold a conservation easement on the land. This deal builds on the momentum of The Nature Conservancy's existing work to protect land and natural resources in the quickly growing Central Texas region, as well as on previous collaborations with Hays County to protect the Blanco River and its critical Texas water resources, including Jacob's Well.

<https://www.nature.org/en-us/newsroom/el-rancho-cima-texas/>