

Interagency Task Force on Economic Growth and Endangered Species
Houston Toad Advisory Committee
Recommendations

Geographic area of focus: Austin, Bastrop, Burleson, Colorado, Lavaca, Lee, Leon, Milam and Robertson counties.

Information on existing programs to assist the recovery of the Houston toad.

See Attachment A.

Information on innovative programs in the region addressing the Houston toad while promoting economic growth.

The Houston Toad Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI), described in detail in Attachment B, is designed to enhance income opportunities for agricultural producers (e.g., by improving range conditions) while also creating improved habitat conditions for the Houston toad.

Cost-efficient and effective recommendations for economic development and Endangered Species Act compliance in the range of the Houston toad.

1. Develop an “Endangered Species Act 101” presentation for government officials and others who may benefit from this type of information. The presentation should include an explanation of the Endangered Species Act and how the Act applies to the Houston toad and its habitat. It should include a discussion of the real, as opposed to perceived implications of the Act (i.e., a “myths debunked” section). An explanation of conservation tools, specifically habitat conservation plans (HCPs) and safe harbor agreements (SHAs) should be provided, including case studies of the Lost Pines HCP and existing Houston toad SHAs. Include a discussion of property tax-related issues such as how HB604 has the potential to benefit landowners that are participating in a federal endangered species permit. Target counties include all of those within the existing and potential range of the Houston toad (Austin, Bastrop, Burleson, Colorado, Ft. Bend, Harris, Liberty, Lavaca, Lee, Leon, Milam, and Robertson). Target audiences include:
 - a. City and county government officials (e.g., City Council members, County Commissioners, Appraisal District staff and others). Solicit the Texas Association of Counties (TAC), Texas Association of Appraisal Districts, and other similar associations to include this presentation as part of their education curriculum to fulfill CEU requirements. Local USDA staff (Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency).
 - b. Resource Conservation and Development staff.

- c. Producer groups (e.g., Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association).
 - d. Realtors, Bankers, Chambers of Commerce, Civic Organizations. This presentation could be part of an educational curriculum to fulfill CEU requirements for certain groups.
 - e. Interested Political Action Committees.
2. Conduct an economic analysis of current land management practices (grazing, forestry, game management, and other economic activities) within the range of the Houston toad, and include an analysis of the costs and benefits of implementing specific practices to conserve the toad (e.g., brush management, prescribed fire, re-forestation). The results of this analysis should be made available to landowners and landowner groups through workshops (see item 3 below) and web sites (www.txendangeredspecies.org and others). In addition, the results of this analysis would inform all types of financial incentive and cost share based programs (see items 4 and 5 below).
3. Conduct land management workshops (similar to those that TPWD and USFWS have conducted each year in Bastrop County) in counties throughout the range of the Houston toad. Consider partnering with Texas Forest Service, Texas Parks and Wildlife, US Fish and Wildlife Service and other agencies and organizations in the development and implementation of these workshops (as TFS and the others have experience with, and routinely conduct land management workshops around the state). Include presentations on management activities designed to provide both wildlife (specifically Houston toad) and economic (e.g., agriculture, forestry, property tax) benefits. Show specific examples of the financial costs and benefits for various land management scenarios. Depending on the audience and the interests, include some or all of the following:
 - a. Discuss the provision in the 2008 Farm Bill that enables agricultural producers to receive an income tax deduction for expenditures paid or incurred for implementing actions benefiting the recovery of federally threatened or endangered species starting in Tax Year 2009.
 - b. Discuss the tax implications of conservation easements.
 - c. Describe the opportunity for landowners to participate in safe harbor through the range-wide programmatic agreement (which should be available by fall 2010).
 - d. Discuss HB604, which allows landowners to move directly into a wildlife tax valuation without first having received an agricultural tax valuation (this would be particularly relevant to counties that contain subdivisions within quality HT habitat and landowners with tracts having fewer than the required minimum acreage for wildlife management, as established by the individual counties).

4. Identify and develop environmental market opportunities in Texas with key goals being the promotion of sustainable economic development and the recovery of endangered species. As a first step, initiate the development of a small number of ecosystem credit accounting systems around the state that target specific species and landscapes. Use lessons-learned from the Fort Hood Recovery Credit System and other credit-based systems (e.g., Utah Prairie Dog Habitat Credit Exchange and Willamette Partnership: see <http://willamettepartnership.org/ecosystem-credit-accounting>) to establish protocols, resources, methodology and participants (e.g., sellers, buyers, system administrator and others). In the case of the Houston toad the primary focus would be on the development of a credit accounting system for the toad and its habitat; however other ecosystem values such as wetlands, riparian habitats and carbon sequestration should be considered and included in the development of the accounting system as feasible. Initiate pilot projects to test the systems.
5. Provide state funds to leverage federal investment in enhancing the income potential of agricultural producers and restoring/enhancing Houston toad habitat in the Greater Alum Creek Watershed. For example, the current Houston toad CCPI program provides up to 70% cost-share for producers to implement a variety of conservation practices that benefit both the economics of the agricultural operation and habitat conditions for the Houston toad. State funds could be used to increase the cost-share (thereby making this program more affordable to landowners) and/or provide an incentive (e.g., a rental payment) to offset temporary losses of income due to grazing deferments. Use information from the economic analysis (see item 2 above) to determine appropriate payment levels and benefits received per dollar invested.
6. Make a clear determination as to whether federal endangered species permits other than HCPs, such as safe harbor permits, can assist a landowner in qualifying directly for wildlife property tax valuation via HB604. Establish a clear definition of the term “conservation easement” as referenced in HB604.
7. Assess results of the current Houston Toad CCPI that is underway in Bastrop County and, if appropriate, establish one or more CCPIs in other high priority landscapes within the range of the Houston toad.
8. Encourage and work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to streamline, and thereby accelerate the permitting process for agreements (e.g., safe harbors as well as regional and individual habitat conservation plans) that are designed to create a net benefit to the species. Consider supporting an independent third party to review all of the steps of the permitting process and to develop recommendations for streamlining the process.