Balcones Canyonlands Preserve

Status Summary

September 24, 1999

Background: Since May 2, 1996, Travis County and the City of Austin have jointly held a regional permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to allow incidental take of eight locally occurring federally-listed endangered species under section 10(a)(1)(B) of the Endangered Species Act. "Take" essentially refers to the situation where development removes occupied endangered species habitat or results in the species displacement. The 30-year permit, referred to as the Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan (BCCP), calls for the creation of a preserve system to protect the eight endangered species as well as 27 species of concern. The BCCP allows for approved incidental take outside of proposed preserve lands within the permit boundaries (roughly the western half of Travis County), and covers the mitigation for new public schools and infrastructure projects of the participating agencies (Travis County, the City of Austin, and the Lower Colorado River Authority).

To minimize and mitigate the impacts of take, the Permit Holders (County and City) agreed to: assemble a minimum of 30,428 acres of endangered species habitat in a preserve system in western Travis County, provide for the ongoing maintenance, patrol, and biological management of the preserved habitat, and conduct biological monitoring and research activities in support of the BCCP terms and conditions. The BCCP offers landowners and developers an alternative to mitigating for development of endangered species habitat directly through the USFWS, whereby they can come to the BCCP for a habitat determination and participate in the BCCP. Participation fees are used to partially fund acquisition of the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve ("BCP" or "Preserve").

- **Status of BCP Land Acquisition:** The permit requires that the 30,428 acres be assembled within twenty years of issuance of the permit. The BCCP Managing Partners (Travis County, City of Austin, the Lower Colorado River Authority, The Nature Conservancy, and Travis Audubon Society) along with private landowners, have assembled 23,851 acres of dedicated BCP lands. The City has completed spending $42 million in voter approved bonds on BCP acquisition and now manages 12,751 acres for the BCP. The proposed preserve acquisition funding on the 1993 County bond election was narrowly defeated. Without funds, the County has not been in a position to acquire BCP land until recently.

Several years ago, the County dedicated 507 acres of already owned County land to the BCP (Hamilton Pool Preserve, Wild Basin Preserve, and a portion of Bob Wentz Park known as Romberg Preserve). At the end of April 1999, the 124 acre Lake Perspectives tract was added to the County's BCP tracts, bringing the managed acreage for the County to 631 acres. The current primary geographic focus for acquisition is the Cypress Creek Macrosite, which includes Lake Perspectives and covers an area north of Lake Travis between RR 620 and Sandy Creek. Travis County received a $2 million preserve acquisition grant in 1998 and a $1.5 million preserve acquisition grant in 1999 toward acquiring the first and second phases (490 acre tract) of endangered species habitat in this macrosite overlooking Lake Travis. An option on the tract will be held by the Trust for Public Land until the County is able to make payment expected to be complete within the next 6 months.

Two current sources of funding for acquisition are the mitigation fees paid to the BCCP, and Travis County's Tax Increment Financing (TIF) program, which increases each year as more properties are added either through direct participation with the BCCP, or through issued individual 10(a)s that benefit from the BCCP. While funds are needed for acquisition, it is likely that additional tracts will come to the BCCP (and to the County for management) as mitigation for individual 10(a)s, with no acquisition costs for the County.

Urban encroachment of the habitat is fast-paced and is taking up considerable amounts of proposed BCP lands. With approximately 6,577 acres yet to be dedicated to the BCP, the Permit Holders (primarily the County at this point) need to continue to identify alternative funding sources and strategies to complete the preserve and comply with the federal permit. The pace of urban development and rising land costs could literally make it impossible to meet the requirements of the BCCP. In order to set aside the habitat before much more development occurs, we must identify funds to acquire options or outright purchases. We are working with the USFWS and the Trust for Public Land to maximize the amount of assistance from the federal government. We are hopeful that the continued urgency of our local situation, based on the pace of development and the extreme risk of significant habitat being lost forever, will inspire the USFWS to release emergency acquisition funds, in addition to the $2 million land acquisition grant we received this year. The USFWS recognizes the relative importance of our local effort and has already committed to acquiring up to 46,000 acres for the national wildlife refuge in northwestern Travis County and portions of Burnet and Williamson Counties. By making such a commitment, the USFWS has relieved the burden on local governments and taxpayers. Additionally, the $2 million federal grant represents 1/3 of last year's available land acquisition funds (nationwide), including endangered species protection efforts in California, Utah, Florida, and south Texas. We recently were notified by the USFWS that we also have $1.5 million grant funding for acquisition for this fiscal year. The County will submit to the USFWS another land acquisition grant for the next funding cycle.

- **<u>Summary of Existing Preserve Acreages</u>** by BCCP managing partner entity or private parties:

City of Austin	12,751 acres
Travis County	631 acres
LCRA	2,706 acres
Travis Audubon Society	680 acres
The Nature Conservancy -10(a) mitigation	4,244 acres
Other Private 10(a) mitigation land	2,839 acres

- **<u>Travis County's Balcones Canyonlands Preserve Land</u>:** (total 631 acres)
  Hamilton Pool Preserve (232 acres)
  Wild Basin Preserve (227 acres)
  Romberg Tract (48 acres)
  Lake Perspectives (124 acres)

- **<u>Pending Preserve Addition</u>: (for Travis County)**
  Vista Point (Shellberg) Tract Phases 1 & 2 - 490 acres (purchasing with federal grant funding) – Phase 1 September 1999 and Phase 2 approximately March 2000.

  Grandview Hills 10(a) – 313 acres of conservation easement and fee simple ownership, expected to be accepted by January 2000.

- **<u>Needs Summary:</u>**
  - A total of 6,577 acres are needed to complete the Preserve.
  - The USFWS is currently working with several applicants on individual 10(a) permits that could potentially add several thousand of these needed acres to the Preserve. Therefore, it is assumed that Travis County will need to acquire at least 3,000 additional acres to complete the Preserve.
  - The Cypress Creek and Bull Creek Macrosites are the highest priorities for acquisition because of their high biological significance for the species listed in the BCP 10(a) permit.
  - Travis County estimates that it will need at least $30 million to complete the Preserve at today's prices. Legally, the County cannot borrow money or bind future Commissioners Courts' spending, but there may still be ways for conservation assistance by third parties.
  - Third party roles may include: the donation of money or Preserve land, the purchase of preserve land held by the donor to be sold to the County in the future, the purchase of a first option on an important tract, or the purchase of a conservation easement.
  - It is urgent that the priority acquisition area be acquired soon due to the rapid pace of development, the rapidly increasing price to acquire these lands, and the extreme risk of significant habitat being lost forever.
  - Eventually, as lands outside the Preserve acquisition area that participate in the BCCP or other 10(a)s are developed, the County's Tax Increment Financing (TIF) program will generate millions of dollars annually to be used for BCP acquisition and management by the County. To date, the TIF has generated $270,000 in two years.

- **<u>Balcones Canyonlands Preserve Acquisition Priority List</u>**

The following is a list of the current highest priorities for acquisition for the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve (BCP). Tracts are listed in priority order by macrosite; the highest priorities within each macrosite have asterisks. Acreages are approximations.

Cypress Creek Macrosite:

Southern section:
* Tomen Parke – 550 acres
* Purcell – 250 acres
* Blackmore - 44 acres
  Bunton/McDonald/Holdworth – 140 acres

Northern section:
* Blizzard/ R Bar B – 255 acres
* Spezia – 105 acres
  King - 60 acres
  Schultz – 130 acres (development on some of this?)
  Clarke – 37 acres
  Blake – 44 acres
  (Toops – 180 ac. 10(a) pending)
  (Attwood - 31 acres – lost?)

Bull Creek Macrosite:

* Ribelin – 742 acres [just applied for 10(a)]
* Neal/Horse Thief Hollow – 615 acres
  Kruger – 95 acres
  Wendland – 164 acres

Other:

Karst:
McNeil Cave Cluster (McNeil Road and Parmer Lane) – 50-100 acres -
BCP caves: Fossil Garden Cave, Weldon Cave, No Rent Cave – contain Bone Cave Harvestman (endangered species)

***Outside the Acquisition Area*:**
Wolf Mountain Ranch -1043 acres (South Lake Austin macrosite)

- **BCP Priority Tract Descriptions:**

Cypress Creek Macrosite

Grandview Hills / Tomen-Parke tract (parcels 12 &13) - 549 acres off of FM 620. We are seeking federal grant money to purchase the remaining acreage in this large property, which contains most of the remaining occupied black-capped vireo habitat in Travis County.

Purcell – 250 acres – important caves, GCW, historic and potential BCV

Blackmore - 44 acres

Bunton/McDonald/Holdworth – 140 acres – have contacted and are interested in conservation

Blizzard/ R Bar B – 255 acres

Spezia – 105 acres

King - 60 acres

Schultz – 130 acres - (development on some of this?)

Clarke – 37 acres

Blake – 44 acres

Bull Creek Macrosite:

Ribelin – 742 acres (just applied for 10(a)

Neal/Horse Thief Hollow – 615 acres

Kruger – 95 acres

Wendland – 164 acres

***Other**:*

McNeil Cave Cluster – 50-100 acres -
BCP caves: Fossil Garden Cave, Weldon Cave, No Rent Cave – contain Bone Cave Harvestman (end. species)

Wolf Mountain Ranch -1043 acres (South Lake Austin macrosite)
It appears that there may not be enough land inside the BCP acquisition area boundaries with willing sellers to achieve the required acreage. This tract contains excellent habitat and adjoins Preserve land and this addition could provide needed Preserve acres.

- **BCP Education Goals - Multi-entity education needs:**

The Balcones Canyonlands Preserve system provides a tremendous opportunity for environmental education for area residents and visitors, and for the public support of Preserve protection efforts. The government and non-profit BCP managing partners have existing environmental education programs but there is the need for coordination between the BCP partners and the need to develop new programs that specifically address Preserve needs and issues.

Target audiences**: general public, preserve neighbors, educators, students**

Needs:

- BCP Education Coordinator
- "Train the trainer" program for training volunteer educators (similar to or in coordination with the local Master Naturalists program)
- Volunteer programs – planting, surveys, non-native plant removal, restoration, litter removal, trail maintenance
- Educational materials – kiosks, signs, brochures, maps
- Outreach – news releases, PSA's, articles, talk shows, neighbor informational talks and printed information, paid advertising, website