

Pedernales River Alliance (PRA) - What We Do

The Pedernales River Alliance is a grassroots organization that advocates for the river, its tributaries and the watershed. We seek to protect ground and surface water in the Pedernales River Watershed from the threat of over-development, pollution and depletion. We seek to

- Educate ourselves and others about the threats posed by unsustainable development
- Educate ourselves and others the benefits of good water policies
- Identify practices, policies and regulations that will protect the Pedernales River Watershed and aquifers and help to preserve these
- Identify current practices, policies and regulations that may need revision and help bring about change

In 2019, huge “SOLD” signs went up on 3 properties at the corner of Luckenbach Rd. and US Hwy 290 in Gillespie County. A Houston developer **had purchased 140 acres** and planned to build a whiskey distillery, a conference center, outdoor amphitheater, two stages and recording studio, two lakes, 5 helipads, a bank, a Harley Davidson shop, 3 apartment complexes with approximately 240 units in each phase and a Salt Lick BBQ. The developer also proposed re-routing Luckenbach Rd. so that access to Luckenbach Rd would be via his properties.

An initial group of 4 neighbors began sharing concerns and brainstorming. Letters to the developer focused on water availability and waste disposal. The County Commissioner for Precinct #3 claimed that several locals were in favor of the development. This news prompted the three to reach out to the community. We started with a brochure and a petition by which we were able to collect over 200 names with phone numbers and emails.

In 2021, the initial group expanded to a 5-member steering committee and we settled on a name for our group: Pedernales River Alliance. We purchased a domain name and began building a website <https://www.pedernalesriveralliance.org/> At the same time, we connected with The Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance (GEAA), a 501c3 nonprofit organization which unites 58 organizations throughout a 21 county region in Central and South Texas behind a plan to protect the Edwards and Trinity aquifers, their contributing watersheds, and the Texas Hill Country. GEAA agreed to act as the fiscal agent for the newly formed Pedernales River Alliance. We reached out to Hill Country Alliance which provided education, encouragement and guidance. We continue to work closely with these two organizations and are grateful for the support we receive from them.

The initial development at Luckenbach Road began experiencing financial and legal problems resulting in a management shakeup. The developers revised their vision for the 140 acres and have since pledged to create a more sustainable development.

Meanwhile, other concerns arose:

- residents on the river reported that county and city law enforcement were using a mound of dirt near the river as a shooting range
- a commercial enterprise was reported to be using heavy machinery to tear up the riverbank
- we received a phone call about unauthorized pumping of water from the river
- a resident reported unauthorized removal of rock and gravel from the river

These were minor events compared to a huge development but it was necessary to address each one quickly to help residents begin to see us as a group willing to protect the river and to establish ourselves as such in the community. This is necessary as responding to requests for Wastewater Discharge permits are far more complex and require timely responses. You will need the support of the community to adequately respond.

This is needed because very quickly we moved to informing and educating the residents of Gillespie County about permit requests before the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) for wastewater discharges-one into a dry creek bed and the other directly into the Pedernales River. Some have argued that these two permits are not worth the trouble of protesting. We disagree whole-heartedly.

The Pedernales River is already compromised from over-pumping of water from the aquifer and from the addition of city wastewater discharges. It simply does not have the flow needed to dilute. Additionally, we know that the Hensel Aquifer is close to the surface and that aquifer recharges the Ellenburger Aquifer, the source of drinking water for the majority of residents throughout the county. Pollution of the river threatens the drinking water for Austin as the Pedernales provides 23-27% of the drinking water there. Last, but definitely not least, freshwater mussels known as Fatmuckets make the Pedernales its home. The river is designated as critical habitat for them. If the river becomes too polluted for them, if the flow becomes too low, they will die. The Pedernales River Alliance seeks to be good stewards of the water that flows through our county.

Since day one, we have been learning and growing. One of the first lessons learned was that developers often invest millions of dollars in laying and burying pipe and septic systems well before any permits for wastewater treatment and discharge are in place. In this way they can tell your county officials, "Trust us, we did everything correctly and we really do not want to dig it all up." Another lesson we learned is that developers will also drill wells without any consultation with the Underground Water District. Their expectation is that they will get all the water they need or want. These days that is not likely to happen if their development lies with the Ellenburger Critical Groundwater Depletion Area-1. When your County officials stand up to developers, support them and thank them.

We regularly attend "Coffee with the City Manager" meetings to learn and share information. We also attended Hill Country Underground Water District (HCUWCD) Board Meetings where we learned that the HCUWCD was requesting inputs on rule changes. We provided inputs and edited the rules for clarity. We still attend those meetings. We have since volunteered to provide Outreach and Water Conservation Education using certified Texas Master Naturalists who are also Texas Waters Specialists. Through the Gillespie County Economic Development Board report we learned that over 7,500 units or lots were being built or in the planning stages. Get to know the people on this list and know their staff as well. You would be amazed at what folks will tell you on the down low.

Know that you are not alone and you do not have to recreate the wheel. Meet with other advocacy groups. In our case we have met with Save Our Springs (SoS) and hope to build an overarching alliance for the entire length of the Pedernales River. We are also in regular conversation with both the Blanco County Conservation Initiative (BCCI) and the Llano River Watershed Alliance (LRWA). Recently, we welcomed the Kerr County Water Alliance (KCWA.) We are a member group of the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance (GEAA.) We help each other offering advice, assistance, and encouragement.

Lastly, know who your representatives are in the state legislature and get to know their staff. You may not always agree with their politics but they can sometimes help, especially when it is apparent that a Public Meeting is needed with developers and TCEQ on a draft discharge permit. Be sure to tell them thank-you for their support.

If it sounds like we have been left with the impression that developers and investors outside of Gillespie County consider this county, and other counties in the Texas Hill Country, to be ripe for development and easy targets because of lack of strong rules, regulations and enforcement, that is the case. We hope to change that.

It is our hope that The Pedernales River Alliance will eventually be seen as a resource for the city and the county as well as for developers who desire to create more sustainable developments. We believe that together we will be able to protect the river and the watershed for future generations.