



Bexar County Commissioners Court

San Antonio, Texas 78205-3036

210.335.2555

210.335.2926/fax

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Contact: Laura Jesse

210.335.0073/o

210.787.9038/m

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service awards grant for habitat conservation plan

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Thursday it will grant \$1.3 million to Bexar County and the City of San Antonio to fund the development of a regional habitat conservation plan. The County and City will split a 25 percent match, or \$446,897.

Habitat conservation plans are approved and authorized by the Fish and Wildlife Service to give landowners, citizens groups and local governments the ability to protect endangered species habitats and allow responsible growth and development at the same time. A number of Texas counties — including Travis, Williamson, Hays and Comal counties — have such plans in place or are in the process of developing a plan. Bexar County and San Antonio make up the only remaining major urban center in Texas that has more than 10 endangered species and no regional habitat conservation plan.

The proposed Southern Edwards Plateau Habitat Conservation Plan is critical to the continued growth and development of Bexar County and surrounding counties, the protection of more than 10 listed endangered species in the region, and the protection of the growing scope of military missions coming to the area in the next few years. The regional plan would include Bandera, Medina, Kendall and Kerr counties.

“This program is desperately needed for the region’s continuing viability,” said Andrew Winter, environmental engineer for Bexar County. “It will give developers a tool to develop in compliance with the Endangered Species Act; it also will give the local

governments and residents the power to control our own development in light of the Endangered Species Act. The whole purpose of the plan is to put the required mitigation of endangered species into the hands of the local community.”

Although habitat conservation plans can take years to complete, having one in place allows a more expedited process required for ‘incidental take permits.’ Such permits allow a private developer to disturb an endangered species habitat by mitigating the taking through activities outlined in the plan, such as paying an impact fee to support habitat acquisition or conservation.

“This is something that grew out of our concern about preserving Camp Bullis as the premiere military medicine training grounds without hampering the growth of our region,” County Judge Nelson Wolff said. “But having a conservation plan is not just about the military, it’s also necessary to preserve our unique ecosystems, our aquifer and the region’s natural heritage.”

It will take about two years to complete a plan as complex as the Southern Edwards Plateau Habitat Conservation Plan.