

Land Stewardship Produces a Healthy Texas

Voluntary land stewardship, the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care, is the keystone for preserving the natural resources of Texas. With land in Texas being approximately 95% privately owned, voluntary land stewardship is vital to keeping these resources healthy. It all starts with a **Conservation Plan**. Farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural producers have been working with their local soil and water conservation districts for over 75 years receiving technical assistance to develop and implement conservation plans for their operations.

A conservation plan focuses on the specific needs and objectives of the individual producer. Whether that objective is grazing management for livestock, wildlife habitat enhancements, timber management, cropland irrigation efficiency improvements, cover crops for better soil, brush management, or native grass restoration, the Texas agricultural producer faces many challenges head on in an effort to be a good steward. The implementation of some of these conservation practices can be expensive, but the landowner, and ultimately all of Texas, will reap the benefits through sustainable food and fiber along with water quality enhancements.

The foundation to any conservation plan is to focus on soil health. Soil health is defined as the continued capacity of soil to function as a vital living ecosystem that sustains plants, animals, and humans. This definition speaks to the importance of managing soils so that they are sustainable for future generations. We must remember that soil contains living organisms that when provided the basic necessities of life – food, shelter, and water – perform functions required to produce food and fiber.

Healthy soil gives us clean air and water, ample crops and forests, productive grazing lands, diverse wildlife, and beautiful landscapes. Soil does all this by performing five essential functions:

1. **Water Management** – Soil helps control where rain, snowmelt, and irrigation water goes. Water and dissolved solutes flow over the land or into and through the soil.
2. **Sustaining Plant and Animal Life** – The diversity and productivity of living things depends on soil.
3. **Filtering and Buffering Potential Pollutants** – The minerals and microbes in soil are responsible for filtering, buffering, degrading, immobilizing, and detoxifying organic and inorganic materials
4. **Cycling Nutrients** – Carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus, and many other nutrients are stored, transformed, and cycled in the soil.
5. **Physical Stability and Support** – Soil structure provides a medium for plant roots. Soils also provide support for human structures and protection for archeological treasures.

The idea of land stewardship is not only important in an agricultural and rural setting, but for the urban population as well. The benefits of a conservation plan can easily be demonstrated by the food in our grocery stores, the water in our taps, the clothes on our backs, and the lumber in our homes. Also, many living in urban areas enjoy the scenic landscapes across our state that agricultural producers have managed for wildlife, migratory birds, and even bees and butterflies. Furthermore, some cities have brought the land stewardship concept into their own backyards, as urban agriculture, urban farming, community forests, and native landscaping are becoming more popular. Not only has this trend positively impacted urban communities socially and economically, it has also educated and reconnected these people to the land, if even on a small scale.

Land stewardship is a success in Texas, but only because of agricultural producers and private landowners that are willing and motivated to voluntarily implement conservation practices that keep our natural resources healthy for today, and into the future.



Association of Texas
Soil & Water Conservation Districts



TEXAS SHEEP & GOAT
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