



# Stop Sewage Pollution in the Hill Country!

All Texans treasure the Hill Country for its pristine rivers, creeks, and springs. Two underground aquifers also supply drinking water for millions of residents. However, the Hill Country's streams and aquifers are facing a growing threat from sewage pollution. While the region's population has exploded, wastewater treatment and regulation haven't kept up. To protect the Hill Country's natural waters, the Texas Legislature and the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) must take these steps:

- **New sewage discharge permits should not be issued in sensitive parts of the Hill Country.**
- **Alternative wastewater options such as land irrigation and beneficial reuse should be expanded and incentivized.**
- **Strict numerical limits for nitrogen and phosphorus should be added to all existing wastewater permits.**

## Treated Sewage Still Pollutes

All sewage plants that discharge treated wastewater into a stream or lake must have a permit from TCEQ. Permits include limits on the amount of pollutants that can remain in sewage after treatment. Plants must test their treated sewage regularly, and if they find an exceedance, they must report it to TCEQ and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

### **Most sewage plants are exceeding their pollutant limits.**

The *Hill Country Sewage Scorecard*, a new report, examined the self-reported monitoring data from 48 municipal sewage discharge plants in the region's 17 counties. The report found that 81% of all plants exceeded at least one of the pollutant limits in their TCEQ permits since 2017. Only 9 plants had no exceedances, while 7 plants had more than 500 days with exceedances

### **Most plants aren't penalized for pollutant exceedances.**

Of the 38 plants with pollutant exceedances, only 22% received a formal enforcement action or monetary penalty from TCEQ during the study period. Of the 7 plants with more than 500 days of pollutant exceedances, only 3 plants were subject to a formal action or penalty.

### **Many Hill Country streams can't handle sewage.**

Because rivers and creeks in the Hill Country often have bare rocky channels, they're less able to assimilate pollutants from treated sewage than streams in the rest of the state with vegetated soil banks. And because Hill Country streams often have low or no flow during dry months, treated wastewater can make up much (and sometimes all) of the stream volume below a sewage plant.

### **Algae-causing nutrients aren't removed in sewage treatment.**

Treated sewage often has high levels of nitrogen and phosphorus — also known as nutrients — which can fertilize the explosive growth of algae in streams and lakes. According to the EPA, 34% of all major sewage treatment plants nationwide have limits on how much nutrients can remain in treated sewage. In Texas, only 7% of major plants have these limits.

### **High nutrient levels are causing algae outbreaks.**

Thick carpets of algae have blanketed the South San Gabriel River immediately below Liberty Hill's municipal sewage plant for years. A recent suit filed by a local resident seeks to have a judge examine whether the pollutant limits in Liberty Hill's TCEQ permit are sufficiently stringent. The Blanco River was also coated with algae when it received treated wastewater from Blanco's

municipal sewage plant from November 2018 to November 2019. A study found that nutrient levels in the river during this time were significantly higher below the Blanco sewage plant than above it.

### **One judge recently rejected a new sewage discharge permit.**

The city of Dripping Springs has been able to grow for years by using land irrigation to dispose of its treated sewage, but in 2016 it applied for a permit to discharge wastewater into Onion Creek. While TCEQ approved the permit, the city has yet to build a discharge plant. In October 2020, a state district court judge ruled that the Dripping Springs permit violated state water quality standards and federal law. Specifically, the judge found that TCEQ ignored scientific evidence that sewage discharge would degrade water quality in Onion Creek, harming its use for recreation and wildlife.

## **Better Sewage Solutions Exist**

We know that better rules for sewage treatment don't have to hinder development. In 1986, TCEQ banned new discharge permits around the Highland Lakes. Development has continued to take place in this buffer zone, enabled by land application permits that allow treated wastewater to be irrigated onto fields and parks. In addition, several communities have adopted the beneficial reuse of wastewater. Marble Falls, Lakeway, and Austin have built "purple pipe" recycled wastewater systems, while Wimberley recently constructed a "One Water" school that reuses both stormwater and wastewater on-site.

TCEQ also banned new discharge permits over the Edwards Aquifer Recharge Zone in 1996. But since then, there's been no further action to regulate wastewater in the Hill Country. Both the Legislature and TCEQ have failed to act, even though the region's population has soared dramatically, and even though sewage treatment technology has improved significantly. Because of this inaction, sewage pollution continues to harm streams and infringe on the property rights of downstream landowners.

### **The Legislature should direct TCEQ to take these steps:**

- **TCEQ should inspect sewage plants more frequently, and should issue fines for all pollutant exceedances. The agency should be provided with sufficient funding for increased enforcement.**
- **TCEQ should add strict numerical limits for nitrogen and phosphorus to all existing wastewater discharge and land application permits in the Hill Country.**
- **TCEQ, together with a citizens task force, should produce a report on how alternative wastewater options such as beneficial reuse, land irrigation, and on-site treatment systems can be expanded and incentivized.**
- **TCEQ should extend the current ban on new wastewater discharge permits in the Recharge Zone of the Edwards Aquifer to the Contributing Zone, which helps refill this crucial source of drinking water.**
- **TCEQ, together with a citizens task force, should identify other Texas streams that are sensitive to wastewater pollution in order to determine whether they would also benefit from a discharge ban.**

## **Stop sewage pollution in the Hill Country with better wastewater solutions!**



*The No Dumping Sewage Coalition was formed in 2017 to advocate for stronger sewage regulations in the Hill Country. Its members include the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance (GEAA), based in San Antonio; the Wimberley Valley Water Association, based in Wimberley; and Clean Water Action, Save Our Springs Alliance (SOS), and Save Barton Creek Association (SBCA), based in Austin.*

*For more information, please visit [NoDumpingSewage.org/Resources](http://NoDumpingSewage.org/Resources) or email [info@NoDumpingSewage.org](mailto:info@NoDumpingSewage.org)*