

Admin Section

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Proposal Cooperator [TX]**Cooperator Organization:** Pecan Bayou Soil and Water Conservation District 553**Contact Person:** Cy Tongate**Address:** PO Box 562**City:** Brownwood**State:** Texas**ZIP Code:** 76804**Phone:** 3254303117**Email:** joseph.tongate@yahoo.com**Applicant Information [TX]****Applicant:** Pecan Bayou Soil and Water Conservation District 553**Contact Person:** Cy Tongate**Address:** PO Box 562**City:** Brownwood**State:** Texas**ZIP Code:** 76804**Phone (work/cell):** 3254303117**Fax:** n/a**Email:** joseph.tongate@yahoo.com**Federal Tax Id:** 75-1538172**UEI:** GDYEACV45KH5**Is the Applicant an Alaskan Native Corporation or an Indian Tribe**

No

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UEI # and Sam.gov Expiration Date

GDYEACV45KH5

Expires November 12th, 2025

3

Project Information**Name of the Project:** Pecan Bayou Soil and Water Conservation District**Community Name(s):** Brown County**Counties:** Brown County**Congressional District:** TX 11th**GIS Coordinates****Ref. Point Name:** Brown County**Lat/Long:** 31.770337, -98.959354**Description:** Brown County coordinates using CWDG eligibility tool.

4

Brief Project Overview and Purpose

Brown County, Texas, is a rural, underserved county with a wildfire risk higher than 86.3% of U.S. counties, where 72.5% of residents live in the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI). The Texas Forest Action Plan and National Cohesive Wildland Fire Mitigation Strategy identify Brown County as a high-priority area for wildfire hazard reduction.

Given the scale of the challenge posed by wildfire hazard in Brown County (as identified during the process of writing the Brown County CWPP), Pecan Bayou Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) sought to develop a program that would mitigate wildfire hazard at a landscape level by addressing root causes of increased wildfire hazard in the region, and which will sustain itself over the long term.

With this in mind, Pecan Bayou SWCD is applying for \$9,174,884 to implement the fuels management program described in the Brown County CWPP. The program will treat 23,105 acres and protect 19,600 structures through mechanical brush management, range planting, and tree/shrub pruning using Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) conservation practice standards.

5

The Brown County CWPP outlines 67 proposed project areas, which are ranked by Texas Wildfire Risk Assessment Portal (TXWRAP) scores, proximity to assessed communities, and whether they protect schools, nursing homes, and key infrastructure as defined in the Brown County Emergency Operations Plan (EOP), and which are divided into 4 Project Tiers to determine the timeline for implementation. Pecan Bayou SWCD is only seeking funding for the first 3 project Tiers (50 project areas) and will seek funding for Tier 4 projects at a later date and through other funding mechanisms.

The program utilizes a cost-share model, using NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) payment schedules. Landowners will agree to 10-year conservation plans for ongoing brush management and grazing management. Pecan Bayou SWCD will provide technical assistance, including project planning, design, installation, performance certification, and status reviews at three, six, and nine years post-implementation. Funding will support the hiring of one full-time and one part-time employee, with additional support from existing staff.

The proposed fuels management program aligns with state and national wildfire mitigation strategies. Pecan Bayou SWCD will integrate and coordinate the program with other conservation programs it administers, which will enhance its impact. Collaboration among key partners, especially Brown County Commissioners Court and Comanche Electric Cooperative Association (CECA) will further enhance the impact of the program. The cost-share model, with long-term conservation planning, makes the conservation gains from the program more sustainable. Pecan Bayou SWCD has extensive experience managing large-scale cost-share conservation programs, including DRIP, WSEP, and the Rio Grande Carrizo Cane Eradication Program, ensuring long-term program success.

Grant Component Type

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2.) Project described in a CWPP that is less than ten (10) years old.

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Include an Eligible CWPP or Equivalent Plan

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gab0ovlBFs-o_Sz9JUV-bjYS3Vy6Racs/view?usp=drive_link

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Is Your Community Considered "At-Risk"

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Yes. Brown County, TX, is considered at risk. It has a higher Wildfire Risk to Homes than 86.3% of counties in the nation. (Source: Wildfire Risk to Communities, Version 2. 2024. As reported by the CWDG Data Tool, <https://wildfirerisk.org/cwdg-tool/48049>)

Roofing Code/Ordinance

Brown County does not have a roofing code or ordinance, but the cities of Brownwood and Early in Brown County do have a roofing code.

9**Grant Waiver**

Yes, Brown County is planning on applying for a grant match waiver. Brown County, TX is considered a low-income county and is eligible to apply for a cost-share waiver.

10

The Census Bureau estimates its median household income is between \$51,239 and \$56,345. To qualify in Texas, the low-end of the estimate must be less than \$59,998. (Source: U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). American Community Survey. Washington, DC. As reported by the CWDG Data Tool, <https://wildfirerisk.org/cwdg-tool/48049>)

Project Description

Brown County is a low-income, underserved, rural county in Central Texas, with a higher wildfire risk to homes than 86.3% of counties in the nation, and where 72.5 percent of the total county population (38,090) live in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). The Texas Forest Action Plan identifies Brown County as a priority county for wildfire and public safety, for Central Texas woodlands conservation, and for water conservation, and identifies the city of Brownwood (the county seat) as a priority for urban forest sustainability. The National Cohesive Wildland Fire Mitigation Strategy identifies Brown County as a county with high relative risk of wildfire, and a county where non-fire fuel treatments are a preferred option, but supporting markets are weak, and a county where community-level planning is most essential. Wildfire hazard in Brown County is primarily a result of woody-plant encroachment (WPE) or thicketization of formerly native grassland, due to a combination of overgrazing, severe and persistent drought conditions, fire suppression, and especially land use changes and land fragmentation as cities and towns have expanded into the WUI over the last 100 years.

Pecan Bayou Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), which administers conservation programs in Brown County and throughout Texas (mostly related to brush management to increase water yield for municipal water supplies), is applying for a grant to fund the implementation of a fuels mitigation program described in the Brown County Community Wildfire Protection Plan, in order to proactively mitigate the likelihood of wildfires and loss of life or property in the event of a wildfire in Brown County. This fuels mitigation program identifies 67 proposed project areas, ranked by Texas Wildfire Risk Assessment Portal (TXWRAP) risk assessment scores and proximity to risk assessment areas, with higher prioritization for county-wide right-of-way projects in collaboration with Brown County Commissioners Court and Comanche Electric Cooperative Association (since they are pre-approved, already mapped, and can be quickly implemented) and projects that protect a key facility identified in the county Emergency Operations Plan (EOP).

Projects are divided into four Tiers, which determines the timeline for implementation (Tier 1 projects within 30 days of securing funding, Tier 2 projects after one calendar year, Tier 3 projects after two calendar years, etc.). Pecan Bayou SWCD is only requesting funding for the first three project Tiers (50 proposed project areas, 23,105.17 acres, 19,600 structures protected) in order to accomplish all tasks and deliverables within the 5-year term of the grant, and will pursue funding for Tier 4 projects at a later date.

1.1 Projects will be implemented on a cost-share basis with the landowner/easement-holder, using the payment schedule for Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), in order to maximize the budget and ensure meaningful and sustainable participation from landowners/easement-holders. All practices (brush management, range planting, tree/shrub pruning) will adhere to NRCS conservation practice standards, as outlined in the NRCS Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG), and landowners/easement-holders will be required to develop a 10-year conservation plan that commits them to ongoing maintenance for the duration of the plan. Pecan Bayou SWCD staffers will perform all technical assistance, to include conducting all pre-application, planning, design, installation, and checkout (including performance certification), and will conduct status reviews of completed projects 3 years after installation, 6 years after installation, and 9 years after installation to ensure compliance with the 10-year conservation plan. A portion of the funding will be used to hire one full-time and one part-time employee to perform technical assistance for this program, in addition to contributions from district directors and current staff (especially in the first year, while new employees undergo training and onboarding, and after the grant term has expired, when they will conduct ongoing status reviews to ensure compliance with conservation plans).

This fuels mitigation program is consistent with Objectives and Strategies in the Texas Forest Action Plan, which encourages incorporating user needs into program delivery (Strategy 1.2.1), delivering professional technical assistance to meet the needs of clientele (Strategy 1.2.2), working with partners to help deliver effective financial incentive programs (Strategy 1.2.3), and working with ranchers, state agencies, and other large landowners to develop and deliver wildland fuel reduction programs (Strategy 2.6.2). This dovetails with the time-tested conservation delivery system (CDS) model of Texas Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Pecan Bayou SWCDs position on local working groups with NRCS and other conservation agencies, and with the practice of conservation planning, which is a cornerstone of the proposed fuels mitigation program. It is consistent with the opportunities identified in the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Mitigation Strategy for Brown County, in that most projects identified in the fuels mitigation plan involve mechanical control (i.e. grubbing/mulching). In addition, by requiring range planting after brush removal (limiting soil erosion and mitigating the infiltration and thicketization of invasive brush), the fuels mitigation program will contribute to the long-term conversion of degraded scrub brushland in Brown County back to its historic, more fire-resilient native grassland, providing long-term and sustainable wildfire hazard mitigation.

The lead partner, Pecan Bayou Soil and Water Conservation District and its staff have a demonstrated history of administering similar programs of a comparable scope, in the Drought Resilience Incentive Program (DRIP), Water Supply Enhancement Program (WSEP), Rio Grande Carrizo Cane Eradication Program (RGCCCEP), and former State Brush Control program, in addition to district directors with extensive experience with NRCS and EQIP, among other federal conservation programs. This experience in both program design and program administration at the local, state, and federal level informs the timeline laid out for completing Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 projects outlined in the fuels mitigation program section of the Brown County CWPP, and elaborated upon in the Accomplishments section of this grant application.

Applicant Budget [TX]				
	Grant	Match		TOTAL
	Funds Requested	Applicant	Non-Federal Contributors	Total Project Cost
1 2	Personnel / Labor:	\$399,960		\$399,960
	Fringe Benefits:			
	Travel:			
	Equipment:			
	Supplies:			
	Contractual:	\$8,774,924		\$8,774,924
	Other:			
	Indirect Costs:			
	TOTAL:	\$9,174,884		\$9,174,884

Budget Explanation

1. Financial Assistance: \$8,774,924.22

To reduce wildfire risk and restore fire-resilient landscapes, this project will provide cost-share incentives to landowners and easement-holders in 50 priority project areas identified in the Brown County CWPP. These incentives support brush management, range planting, and tree/shrub pruning, using 2024 EQIP cost-share rates (\$482.52/acre for brush management and range planting, \$147.24/acre for tree/shrub pruning). Treatments follow NRCS conservation standards and require certification by Pecan Bayou SWCD and approval by Texas A&M Forest Service before cost-share disbursement.

Brush management (NRCS 314) removes hazardous fuels via mechanical IPT (mulching/grubbing) to reduce wildfire intensity and improve emergency access.

Range planting (NRCS 550) stabilizes soil post-brush removal via broadcast or drill seeding, preventing erosion, invasive species, and habitat loss while promoting fire-resilient vegetation.

Tree/shrub pruning (NRCS 660) reduces ladder fuels via mechanical IPT (sawing), lowering structure ignition risk by pruning trees 6-10 ft from the ground, separating canopies, and removing overhanging branches.

Project Tiers & Funding Allocation

These projects, prioritized in the Brown County CWPP, will treat 24,105 acres and protect ~19,600 structures in high-risk wildfire zones. Tier 4 projects were excluded to focus funding on highest-risk areas. Projects below each list acres to be treated, cost-share, and number of structures protected. Projects are for brush management and range planting unless noted as tree/shrub pruning projects.

Tier 1 (8 Projects) \$3,532,885

Brown County ROW (2,700 ac) \$1,302,804, ~1000 structures protected.

Comanche Electric Co-op ROW (2,414 ac) \$1,165,243, ~1000 structures protected.

Bridge (95 ac) \$45,839, ~120 structures protected.

Feather Bay (117 ac) \$56,454, ~100 structures protected.

Lake Brownwood (244 ac) \$117,758, ~500 structures protected.

Rocky Creek (326 ac) \$157,560, ~350 structures protected.

Vickies RV Park (1,120 ac) \$540,422, ~200 structures protected.

Shamrock Shores/Lake Shore (1,000 ac) \$147,240 for tree/shrub pruning, ~600 structures protected.

Total: 8,016.59 acres, 3,870 structures protected.

Tier 2 (32 Projects) \$3,770,300.14

Bluff View (215 ac) \$103,752, ~400 structures.

Willis Creek #2 (393 ac) \$189,631, ~800 structures.

North Lake Brownwood (423 ac) \$204,807, ~600 structures.

North Lake Evacuation Route (35 ac) \$16,888.

Blanket (186 ac) \$89,767, ~200 structures.

Adams Branch (86 ac) \$41,496, ~500 structures.

Wastewater Treatment Plant (110 ac) \$53,077, ~50 structures.

Belle Plain (869 ac) \$419,851, ~350 structures.

Baptist Encampment (109 ac) \$52,595, ~100 structures.

Kirkland Dock (146 ac) \$70,473, ~200 structures.

Harbor Point, Thunderbird Bay, Tamarack Mountain, Blanket, Brownwood, Kirkland Dock, Early, May, Bangs, and Zephyr (6,080 acres) - \$895,219 for tree/shrub pruning, 9500 structures.

Total: 12,038.47 acres, 14,640 structures protected.

Tier 3 (10 Projects) \$1,471,739.08

Brookesmith (143 ac) \$68,781, ~50 structures.

Winchell (136 ac) \$65,838, ~40 structures.

Heartland Mall (169 ac) \$81,432, ~250 structures.

Longhorn Drive (229 ac) \$110,327, ~175 structures.

Deepwater Estates (240 ac) \$115,806, ~75 structures.

Los Trece (376 ac) \$181,497, ~100 structures.

Williams Ranch Road (787 ac) \$379,469, ~100 structures.

Grosvenor (294 ac) \$142,070, ~25 structures.

Indian Creek Town (269 ac) \$129,740, ~25 structures.

Highway 183 (408 ac) \$196,779, ~250 structures.

Total: 3,050.11 acres, 1,090 structures protected.

2. Technical Assistance: \$399,960

To support implementation, Pecan Bayou SWCD will hire a full-time Project Specialist and a part-time Project Assistant to coordinate Tier 2 and 3 landowner projects.

Project Specialist (Full-Time) \$63,993.60/year (\$33.33/hr, 1920 hrs)

Coordinates with stakeholders (landowners, NRCS, Texas A&M Forest Service, Brown County, fire departments).

Oversees conservation delivery (pre-application, planning, design, installation, checkout, status reviews).

Ensures compliance with NRCS conservation standards and wildfire mitigation goals.

Manages documentation (agreements, contracts, conservation plans, certifications, financial disbursement).

Project Assistant (Part-Time) \$15,998.40/year (\$33.33/hr, 480 hrs)

Supports the Project Specialist in landowner coordination, documentation, and status reviews.

Assists pre-application processes and verifies compliance.

Compiles data and performance reports.

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Accomplishments

In the Brown County CWPP, proposed fuels mitigation projects are ranked by risk assessment scores, and then divided into Tiers, in order to provide a rational timeline for projects in the fuels mitigation program. The Brown County CWPP sets a minimum performance target of 3500 acres treated by mechanical IPT per year, which would yield 17,500 acres treated over the term of the grant (out of 23,105.17 acres outlined in the 50 priority project areas in Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3) however, the timeline below frontloads the treatment acres in keeping with Pecan Bayou SWCDs experience managing similar cost-share brush control programs around the state, and in order to account for right-of-way projects that can be implemented immediately and hiring more staff to assist.

Year 1. Tier 1 Implementation, hiring and onboarding.

Within the first 30 days of receipt of funding, Pecan Bayou SWCD will hire a Project Specialist and Project Assistant to support program administration. While these new employees undergo the hiring, onboarding, and training process, current staff will initiate right-of-way projects with Brown County Commissioners Court and Comanche Electric Cooperative Association as outlined in the Brown County CWPP. These projects will immediately enter the installation (contracting, job sheets, pre-construction meetings, engineering reviews) phase, as they are pre-approved and do not require additional planning and design funding for these two projects will be used to hire contractors to implement brush management via mechanical IPT (grubbing, mulching) and range planting using broadcast or drilling, in accordance with appropriate NRCS conservation practice standards. Current staff will also open the first 30-day application window for Tier 1 projects (which are described in greater detail in the budget explanation section), allowing landowners and easement-holders in these top priority project areas to apply for cost-share assistance for brush management and range planting and/or tree/shrub pruning (the specific practice they are eligible for is dependent on the project area they are in) in order to reduce wildfire hazard. Current staff will then begin pre-application (eligibility screening, interviews, site assessments), planning (inventory resources, develop 10-year conservation plans, and digitize plans), and design (prepare maps, conduct site layout planning, and perform engineering assessments) for Tier 1 projects, which should be completed 90 days after receipt of funding (which will be the official start date for contracts, which last 1 year). Right-of-way projects are prioritized because they can be implemented quickly, allowing the program to begin delivering results while new staff complete onboarding and training, in preparation for increased workload in Year 2 for Tier 2 projects (there are 32 Tier 2 projects compared to 8 Tier 1 projects, which will necessitate more labor investment in pre-application and checkout). Installation for remaining Tier 1 projects will take place between 90 and 450 days from receipt of funding, following the same model as Pecan Bayou SWCDs other conservation programs the landowner or easement-holder may perform the work themselves or may direct contract the work to a qualified contractor. Once work is complete, Pecan Bayou SWCD staff will complete a performance certification, measure and map acreage, and ensure work has been completed in accordance with NRCS conservation practice standards. All checkout (site visits, final inspections, performance certification) for Tier 1 projects will be completed by 450 days from receipt of funding, totaling 8016.59 acres treated, 3,870 structures protected, and \$3,532,885 cost-share assistance disbursed.

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Year 2. Tier 2 implementation.

On the first day of the second calendar year, Pecan Bayou SWCD will open a 30-day application window for Tier 2 projects. Within 60 days, Pecan Bayou SWCD will complete pre-application, planning, and design for all Tier 2 participants. Installation of Tier 2 projects will take place between 60 and 420 days from beginning of the second calendar year. As above, Pecan Bayou SWCD staff will complete all checkout by 420 days from receipt of funding, totaling 12,038.47 acres treated, 14,640 structures protected, \$3,770,300.14 cost-share assistance disbursed. Year 2 doesnt include hiring and onboarding new staff, nor does it include large right-of-way projects, but it does include many smaller projects (32 proposed project areas in total, described in greater detail in the budget explanation section) that consist primarily of smaller landowners, so more labor investment will be required, particularly in pre-application and checkout.

Year 3. Tier 3 implementation and Tier 1 status review.

On the first day of the third calendar year, Pecan Bayou SWCD will open a 30-day application window for Tier 3 projects. Within 60 days, Pecan Bayou SWCD will complete pre-application, planning, and design for all Tier 3 participants. Installation of Tier 3 projects (10 total projects) will take place between 60 and 420 days from beginning of the second calendar year. As above, Pecan Bayou SWCD staff will complete all checkout by 420 days from receipt of funding, totaling 3,050.11 acres treated, 1,090 structures protected, \$1,471,739.08 cost-share assistance disbursed. During this time, Pecan Bayou SWCD staff will also complete status reviews for all completed Tier 1 projects (8 total) to ensure compliance with 10-year conservation plans.

Year 4. Unused funding and Tier 2 status review.

On the first day of the fourth calendar year, if unused funding remains as defined in the Brown County CWPP, Pecan Bayou SWCD will establish a final 30-day application period, during which it will accept applications for all project Tiers excluding previous completed projects, using the same process outlined above. In this year, status reviews will be completed for all Tier 2 projects (32 total) to ensure compliance with 10-year conservation plans.

Year 5-11. Grant closeout and ongoing compliance monitoring.

In the fifth year of the project, Pecan Bayou SWCD will complete all performance reporting requirements for the grant, and complete status reviews for all Tier 3 projects (10 total). Once the term of the grant has expired, non-grant-funded staff at Pecan Bayou SWCD will continue status reviews to ensure compliance with 10-year conservation plans (Tier 1 projects will have second status review in Year 6 and third in Year 9; Tier 2 projects will have a second status review in Year 7 and a third in Year 9; Tier 3 projects will have a second status review in Year 8 and a third in Year 9; if any projects are funded with unused funding in Year 4, they will receive status reviews in Year 6, Year 9, and Year 12).

The lead partner, Pecan Bayou Soil and Water Conservation District and its staff have a demonstrated history of administering similar programs of a comparable scope, in the Drought Resilience Incentive Program, Water Supply Enhancement Program, Rio Grande Carrizo Cane Eradication Program, and former State Brush Control program, in addition to district directors with extensive experience with NRCS and EQIP, among other federal conservation programs.

Collaboration

Key Partners:

Pecan Bayou Soil and Water Conservation District. As the primary grant administrator, Pecan Bayou SWCD will oversee program implementation, ensuring compliance with conservation practice standards and funding guidelines. Pecan Bayou SWCD will provide technical assistance, pre-application, planning, design, installation and checkout for all cost-share projects, and will fulfill all performance reporting obligations outlined in the Brown County CWPP. Through its role as the chair of the NRCS Local Work Group, Pecan Bayou SWCD will designate wildfire hazard mitigation as a priority resource concern in Brown County (and in fact, has already done so for the first time in the January 2025 local work group meeting), which will ensure that the proposed fuels management program is supported by other conservation programs in Brown County. In addition, Pecan Bayou SWCD will institute a policy of multiple resource concern priority for the Drought Resilience Incentive Program (DRIP) for its remaining application windows (2026, 2027, and 2028), which it administers directly, prioritizing projects for this water conservation program that also mitigate wildfire hazard, and incentivizing landowners that participate in DRIP to include wildfire hazard mitigation measures in their conservation plans.

Brown County Commissioners Court. The Commissioners Court will coordinate brush removal along county road rights-of-way and along the proposed North Lake Evacuation Route.

Comanche Electric Cooperative Association (CECA). CECA has an ongoing vegetation management program along power line rights-of-way, trimming trees to reduce the risk of downed lines and wildfire hazard. Under this grant, CECA will coordinate brush removal along power line rights-of-way, and will be able to transition from reactive maintenance to a sustainable Integrated Pest Management (IPM) approach, utilizing targeted herbicide treatments following initial mechanical brush removal. Additionally, CECA has committed to maintaining its current budget for Brown County vegetation management, ensuring that grant funding directly increases overall brush control in the county.

Texas A&M Forest Service (TFS). TFS will offer advice and second-level oversight of fuels management activities, ensuring alignment with best practices in wildfire risk reduction.

Cities of Brownwood, Early, Bangs, and Blanket. Each city will be consulted on prioritization of projects within municipal boundaries in the same Tier. Their administrative authority ensures compliance with city planning and regulation, and city engagement will encourage landowner/easement-holder participation in the fuels management program.

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NRCS will provide technical consultation on resource protection and conservation planning. Through its existing network, NRCS will assist in outreach to private landowners, ensuring alignment between broader conservation programs like EQIP and the proposed fuels management program.

Private landowners. Landowners participating in the program will be engaged through cost-share agreements and 10-year conservation plans that ensure ongoing maintenance and sustainable grazing management following initial brush removal. By integrating private participation, the program fosters long-term sustainability beyond the grants funding period.

Local Fire Departments. Fire departments will support outreach to private landowners, especially in residential areas, and will be available to advise landowners in the design and planning phase of the conservation planning process, so that landowners are fully informed as to wildfire hazard risk and best practices, such as defensible space.

Benefits of Collaboration

This program aligns existing conservation efforts with wildfire mitigation, increasing its impact beyond the direct scope of the grant. Pecan Bayou SWCD and its partners will leverage ongoing programs such as CECA's vegetation management efforts, NRCS conservation initiatives, and the Drought Resilience Incentive Program to ensure that fuels management remains a long-term priority in Brown County, and that the proposed fuels management program is supported by a network of other programs in order to maximize efficiency and effectiveness.

By strengthening coordination between conservation planners and firefighters, this program will ensure that conservation projects support real-world firefighting needs when they overlap, such as improving fire engine access to rural parts of Brown County.

Because this proposed fuels management program involves federal, state, local, private, and nonprofit partners, it is far more durable than a program dependent on administrators that rely on a single funding source. Each partner brings resources and experience that reinforce the program's long-term sustainability, ensuring that fuels management remains an ongoing effort rather than a temporary project.

Finally, this approach is replicable across Texas. There are 216 Soil and Water Conservation Districts in Texas, each with comparable resources and technical expertise to Pecan Bayou SWCD. This model provides a blueprint for integrating wildfire mitigation into conservation efforts in counties across the state.

Landscape Impacts

95% of land in Brown County is under private ownership, with the remaining 5% a mix of city, county, Texas Parks and Wildlife, National Guard, and Army Corps of Engineer land. Even a majority of land owned by public entities is leased out for grazing or hunting. 78.69% (475,421 acres) of total land in Brown County is farmland, according to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, which represented a 13% decline in total farmland in the county from the 2017 Census of Agriculture, or a loss of approximately 61,804 acres, mostly to new urban and suburban development and energy production. The average farm size is 283 acres. Brown County now has a higher wildfire risk to homes than 86.3% of counties in the nation, and 72.5% of the county's population (38,090) lives in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI).

Brown County is located in the cross-timbers and prairies ecoregion of Texas. Overgrazing, fire suppression, land use changes and land fragmentation over the last hundred years have caused the uplands to be covered mostly by scrub oak, mesquite, and juniper, while the bottomlands have been invaded by mesquite, a process described as Woody Plant Encroachment (WPE) or thicketization. This has increased evapotranspiration (leading to reduced water yield to Lake Brownwood, the county's primary municipal water supply), reduced livestock productivity (by reducing grazable land), provided habitat for invasive species (especially feral swine, which have contributed to millions of dollars of damage to cropland in Brown County), and most importantly, significantly increased wildfire hazard throughout the county. In the process of writing the Brown County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP), Pecan Bayou SWCD staff conducted 18 community risk assessments in Brown County using the Texas Wildfire Risk Assessment Portal (TXWRAP). 16 out of 18 risk assessments had a Severe surrounding environment hazard rating, and the remaining 2 had a Significant rating brush infiltration is pervasive throughout the county.

The proposed fuels management program as outlined in this grant application targets 16,025.17 acres for brush management and range planting, to eliminate thickets of brush in and around assessed communities; reinforce firebreaks along roads and reinforce natural firebreaks around creeks and draws; eliminate large thickets within a 2-hour fire spread distance of assessed communities and/or key facilities. The method of brush removal will be Mechanical IPT (i.e. mulching and/or grubbing) consistent with NRCS practice code 314 Brush Management, specifically consistent with Additional Criteria to Manage Fuel Loads to Achieve Desired Conditions. Range planting after brush management will help establish a more fire-resilient landscape, and reduce the likelihood of soil erosion and further thicketization post-treatment. Range planting will be conducted after brush removal by broadcast or drilling, consistent with NRCS practice code 550 Range Planting, specifically consistent with Additional Criteria to Increase Carbon Sequestration. The fuels management program also targets 7,080 acres for tree/shrub pruning, primarily in residential areas. The goal of tree/shrub pruning in residential areas is to prune trees 6-10ft from the ground, reduce tree density to prevent canopies from touching, and prune branches overhanging roofs. This should help homeowners proactively mitigate their wildfire risk by creating defensible space. The method of tree/shrub pruning will be Mechanical IPT (i.e. sawing) consistent with NRCS practice code 660 Tree/Shrub Pruning. The brush management, range planting, and tree/shrub pruning projects combined are anticipated to protect approximately 19,600 structures in Brown County.

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This will protect the incorporated cities of Brownwood (the county seat), Early, Bangs, and Blanket; the Lake Brownwood CDP, Thunderbird Bay CDP, unincorporated communities of May, Zephyr, Brookesmith, Winchell, Grosvenor, Owens, and Indian Creek; and new developments outside city limits, including Oak Point, Deepwater Estates, Jenkins Springs, Los Trece, and various RV parks scattered throughout the county. 20 proposed project areas protect a school, nursing home, or key facility outlined in the County Emergency Operations Plan (EOP), including the following: Northwest Elementary School, Brown County Jail, Vicksburg Retirement Community, Brownwood Senior High School, Brown County Retirement Village, Blanket ISD, Wal-Mart Supercenter, United Supermarket, Oncor Electric Delivery, BCWID #1 Wastewater Treatment Plant, Early High School, Early Middle School, Early Elementary School, May ISD, JB Stephens Elementary School, Zephyr ISD, the Chatfield Assisted Living Center, Songbird Loge, Redstone Park, Brownwood Middle School, Oak Ridge Manor Skilled Nursing and Rehab, Brookesmith ISD, Hendrick Clinic, and CARE Nursing Home.

In addition, 16 proposed project areas are entirely within the portion of the Lake Brownwood watershed that drains into Lake Brownwood, totaling 4,213.52 acres of brush management and range planting. In addition to wildfire hazard mitigation, this will also increase water yield in Lake Brownwood. According to brush control feasibility studies of the Lake Brownwood watershed using the Soil and Water Assessment Tool (SWAT) and Ecological Dynamic System (EDYS) models, under normal rainfall conditions this would contribute 8,244.55 acre-ft to Lake Brownwood over the term of the grant, which would represent a 6.93% increase over Lake Brownwood's normal capacity.

Pecan Bayou SWCD is integrating the fuels management program into a broader conservation initiative, linking it with the Drought Resilience Incentive Program, Water Quality Management Program, Feral Swine Abatement Program, Environmental Quality Incentive Program, and others. As chair of the NRCS local workgroup meetings, Pecan Bayou SWCD will designate wildfire hazard as a priority resource concern in Brown County, and in fact has already done so for the first time in its January 2025 local workgroup meeting.

Within its directly administered Drought Resilience Incentive Program (which funds brush management and range planting in the Lake Brownwood watershed in order to increase water yield), Pecan Bayou SWCD will implement a multiple-resource concern priority policy. This means applications that both increase water availability and reduce wildfire risk will receive priority for that program, reinforcing the effectiveness of the proposed fuels management program.

Comanche Electric Cooperative Association (CECA) already dedicates part of its budget to vegetation management along power line rights-of-way. With this grant, CECA aims to transition from reactive maintenance to a sustainable integrated pest management (IPM) approach, using targeted chemical treatments after initial brush removal. Additionally, CECA has committed to maintaining its current budget for Brown County vegetation management, ensuring that any funds freed up by this grant will directly support additional brush control efforts in Brown County.

If funded, this fuels management program will be a transformational conservation effort in Brown County, not only because of its immediate impact, but because of the cascading effect on fuel load reduction through a number of other vegetation management programs operated by the lead partner and contributing partners.

Project Sustainability

Sustained conservation: This project ensures sustained conservation by addressing the root causes of increased wildfire risk in Brown County. The primary strategy is range planting following brush removal, which restores historical grassland ecosystems and prevents the re-infiltration of brush. This approach reduces wildfire hazard over the long-term by maintaining a fire-resilient landscape. To maintain these benefits, participating landowners commit to 10-year conservation plans, ensuring ongoing brush management and sustainable grazing practices. These plans prevent overgrazing, which can lead to brush encroachment, while simultaneously limiting grass fuel loads. Status reviews every three years will ensure compliance beyond the term of the grant.

Paradigm shift in vegetation management along power lines: This project facilitates a fundamental shift in the Comanche Electric Cooperative Associations (CECA) vegetation management strategy. Historically, CECA engaged in reactive maintenance, trimming or removing trees when they became a hazard to power lines, due to limited funding. Under this grant, CECA will be able to remove brush along all power line rights-of-way in Brown County, and will transition to a proactive Integrated Pest Management (IPM) approach afterward, which incorporates targeted herbicide treatments to prevent regrowth following mechanical brush removal. CECA has also committed to additionality, ensuring that existing vegetation management funds for Brown County will not be reduced. This means that every dollar of grant funding represents an expansion of CECAs vegetation management efforts, rather than a replacement of existing work. This ensures that the proposed fuels management program significantly increases the overall scope and impact of wildfire hazard reduction in Brown County.

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7** Cascading effect from other conservation programs: The proposed fuels management program is reinforced by a nexus of conservation programs headed by Pecan Bayou SWCD, which will extend its impact beyond the immediate scope of the grant. The Drought Resilience Incentive Program will institute a policy of multiple resource concern priority, ensuring that brush management for water conservation considers fuel load reduction also, and will also encourage landowners who sign conservation plans under that program to include wildfire hazard mitigation in their plans as well. By setting wildfire hazard mitigation as a priority resource concern for EQIP through the NRCS local workgroup (and pledging to do so each year), Pecan Bayou SWCD makes it more likely that conservation contracts through that program (funded through Congressional appropriations) will support fuel load reduction. Pecan Bayou SWCD will also prioritize brush management contracts for the State Water Quality Management Program in Brown County, and encourage landowners and employees to incorporate wildfire hazard mitigation in their conservation plans.

Administrative sustainability: Pecan Bayou SWCD is well-positioned to sustain and expand this initiative beyond the term of the grant. Pecan Bayou SWCD already employs permanent staff who will continue to conduct status reviews of conservation plans at regular intervals (up to ten years after the grant term has expired), ensuring that ongoing maintenance and grazing management commitments remain enforceable. Pecan Bayou SWCD also has long-term financial stability, due to multiple durable funding sources, including Texas General Revenue appropriations for conservation districts and programs administered by the district, technical assistance funding from the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), local, state, and federal grants, which Pecan Bayou SWCD has a strong track record of securing and managing, and a dedicated trust fund from the districts own fundraising efforts. With these established funding streams and institutional commitments, Pecan Bayou SWCD will ensure that fuel reduction remains an ongoing, integrated effort in Brown County well beyond the five-year term of this grant.

Does this Project Benefit a Low-Income Community

Yes.

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8** Yes. Brown County, TX, meets the "low income" criteria. The Census Bureau estimates its median household income is between \$51,239 and \$56,345. To qualify in Texas, the low-end of the estimate must be less than \$59,998. (Source: U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). American Community Survey. Washington, DC. As reported by the CWDG Data Tool, <https://wildfirerisk.org/cwdg-tool/48049>)

Has this Community Been Impacted by a Severe Disaster: Part 1

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9** Yes, Brown County has experienced nine presidential disaster declarations since 2015 for severe storms, tornadoes, straight-line winds, flooding, and winter storms, along with eight USDA secretarial drought declarations. These disasters have significantly increased wildfire risk by escalating fuel loads and creating volatile fire conditions.

(Source: Federal Emergency Management Agency. (2024). Disaster Declarations Summary. As reported by the CWDG Data Tool, <https://wildfirerisk.org/cwdg-tool/48049>)

USDA Secretarial Disaster Declarations: <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/resources/disaster-assistance-program/disaster-designation-information>

Has this Community Been Impacted by a Severe Disaster: Part 2

Yes, Brown County has experienced nine presidential disaster declarations since 2015 for severe storms, tornadoes, straight-line winds, flooding, and winter storms, along with eight USDA secretarial drought declarations. These disasters have significantly increased wildfire risk by escalating fuel loads and creating volatile fire conditions.

Severe storms, high winds, and tornadoes have caused widespread tree damage, leaving behind downed trees and debris that fuel wildfires. Major flooding events (2024, 2019, 2016, 2015) further intensified this issue by promoting decadent, fast regrowth while degrading plant health and eroding soils, leading to dense thickets of invasive brush that increase fire intensity.

Winter Storm Uri (2021, DR-4586-TX, EM-3554-TX) inflicted severe tree damage and widespread power outages, contributing to massive surface fuel accumulation. Downed power lines and dry debris increased ignition risks, leading to a surge in wildfire ignitions post-storm.

Recurring droughts exacerbate wildfire hazards by drying fuels and making vegetation more susceptible to ignition. Drought and flooding combined have degraded plant resilience, further fueling invasive brush encroachment. The 259 Fire in 2018 (FM-5258-TX) demonstrated the extreme fire behavior fueled by these conditions, spreading rapidly through storm-damaged and drought-weakened vegetation.

The cumulative impact of these disasters has dramatically increased wildfire hazards, underscoring the urgent need for proactive fuel reduction efforts to protect Brown County's communities.

(Source: Federal Emergency Management Agency. (2024). Disaster Declarations Summary. As reported by the CWDG Data Tool, <https://wildfirerisk.org/cwdg-tool/48049>)

USDA Secretarial Disaster Declarations: <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/resources/disaster-assistance-program/disaster-designation-information>

Does the Project Location have Wildfire Hazard Potential

Yes.

Yes. Brown County, TX, is considered at risk. It has a higher Wildfire Risk to Homes than 86.3% of counties in the nation. (

Source: Wildfire Risk to Communities, Version 2. 2024. As reported by the CWDG Data Tool, <https://wildfirerisk.org/cwdg-tool/48049>)