



STAKEHOLDER OUTREACH REPORT

for the Spring Creek
Watershed Protection Plan

September 2021



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This document was prepared by the Houston-Galveston Area Council for the stakeholders of the Spring Creek Watershed Partnership and the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. This project is funded by a Clean Water Act Section 319(h) grant from the United States Environmental Protection Agency administered by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.



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I. Introduction

Spring Creek runs east from headwaters in Waller County to a confluence with the West Fork of the San Jacinto River near its confluence with Cypress Creek. Combined, these waterways contribute appreciable flows to the Lake Houston reservoir—an important drinking water source for the region. As Spring Creek forms the majority of the border between Montgomery and Harris Counties, it connects a diverse landscape transitioning from natural areas such as riparian forest and grassland to the more widely developed areas near the I-45 corridor. Approximately 440 square miles of land area drain into 903 linear miles of stream network within the Spring Creek watershed. This area and its waterways represent an essential part of supporting local communities and economies, recreation, fisheries, and a diverse ecology.

Water quality issues – primarily high levels of fecal waste – are prevalent throughout the Spring Creek Watershed and are of particular concern as flows from Spring Creek contribute to the Lake Houston reservoir. Elevated levels of fecal waste in area waterways can be a result of both human activity and natural influences. Harmful pathogens associated with fecal waste can impact public health. Spring Creek and its tributaries face other water quality concerns like low levels of dissolved oxygen which can endanger aquatic life, and excess nutrients (nitrogen and phosphorus compounds) which can exacerbate low dissolved oxygen concerns. The rapid development of the watershed has created further challenges for local stakeholders as they seek to address the impacts of these and other pollutant sources for a waterway in transition.

The Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) conducted a series of stakeholder outreach efforts to engage local stakeholders, empower their ability to make informed decisions about their community's water quality, and facilitate their active participation in developing a watershed protection plan (WPP) for Spring Creek. The ultimate goal of the stakeholder outreach efforts was to submit an approved WPP that reflected local decisions, met Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) and United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requirements, and focused on the goal of bringing water quality into compliance with state water quality standards.

These efforts were guided by a Public Participation Plan¹ (PPP) developed by H-GAC and approved by TCEQ, and included:

- the formation of the Spring Creek Watershed Partnership (Partnership) (Section 2);
- developing and implementing communication with stakeholders (Section 3);
- facilitating the Partnership through the development of the WPP (Section 4);
- representing the Partnership at public meetings (Section 5); and
- conducting a series of education and outreach events (Section 6).

¹ The PPP is available for review on the project website at: www.springcreekpartnership.com

The outcomes of these efforts are reflected in the draft WPP² developed, reviewed, and approved by the Partnership. Updating and implementing the WPP will rely on a continuity of these efforts and the perpetuation of an engaged stakeholder base. Additional information on stakeholder contact was provided to TCEQ in quarterly progress reports throughout the project.



Figure 1. Stakeholders on the Spring Creek Trail

² The draft WPP is available for review on the project website at: www.springcreekpartnership.com

II. Forming the Spring Creek Watershed Partnership

The basis of a successful WPP development process is structured participation from a diverse set of local stakeholders and technical experts. While the outreach elements engaged a wider public audience, and specific partners contributed to the project in a variety of ways, the core of the stakeholder involvement for the project was focused on the formation and facilitation of the Partnership.

The Partnership is the association of local stakeholders convened by H-GAC and TCEQ to develop the WPP and generally promote the aims of the project. The Partnership is composed of three components: the Steering Committee (leadership), the Work Groups (topic specialists), and the general stakeholder body (general stakeholders), convened by facilitators H-GAC and TCEQ. The focus of the Partnership is local stakeholders, but some representatives from state or regional agencies who had resources or specialized insight were included.

Assembling the Partnership

To develop the Partnership, H-GAC used the following methods to introduce stakeholders to the project, and to generate interest in the Steering Committee before and between the first set of meetings:

- **Formal mailings** – Prior to the first meeting of the Partnership, H-GAC sent a formal mailing to all elected officials, local governments, key partners, and identified community groups in the area.
- **One-on-one meetings** – H-GAC met one-on-one with key partners and other interested parties in the watershed to talk through related efforts, identify local concerns, and generate interest in participation.
- **Email announcements** – H-GAC developed an email list of known local stakeholders and sent multiple emails prior to the initiation of public meetings.
- **Representation at public events** – H-GAC announced the project and invited participation at a series of public meetings or events at which H-GAC gave direct presentations or had booth presences, including: H-GAC’s Natural Resources Advisory Committee, Regional Flood Management Committee, and Basin Steering Committee, the Bacteria Implementation Group (BIG) meetings, the Galveston Bay Estuary Program’s Water and Sediment Quality Subcommittee, and through speaking engagements and outreach at local events in the region (a Woodlands GREEN seminar event (3/25/21), and a Woodlands Township Environmental Services pet waste management event (9/18/21)), and others in which H-GAC was present but did not make formal presentations.
- **Press releases and interviews with local media** – H-GAC issued a press release prior to the initial Partnership meeting. H-GAC was interviewed by the Community Impact Newspaper following the first meeting, and in advance of the 6/3/21 meeting.

- **Partner communications outlets** – H-GAC announcement and publicity of the project was coordinated with, or carried by, several partner agencies, including Bayou Land Conservancy, the Houston-based Citizens Environmental Coalition, and others.
- **Survey** – Between the first and second meetings, as the Partnership was forming, H-GAC conducted a stakeholder survey to determine various stakeholder preferences concerning contact, meeting times and locations, and other elements to improve outreach.

Steering Committee and Work Groups

The Partnership designated a leadership team to provide continuity throughout the project and be ultimately responsible for votes of approval at project milestones. The Steering Committee members agreed to represent not just their specific organization, but the category of organizations they represented. H-GAC worked with TCEQ to identify the necessary interests in the watershed (e.g., agriculture, local government) to ensure the project team took every opportunity to attract representatives from those groups. To ensure the Partnership had adequate interest, H-GAC made a series of one-on-one contacts to discuss potential members and request nominations from the Partnership between the first and second meetings.

Steering Committee

The Steering Committee (**Table 1**) was formed at the second project meeting, based on nominations made between the first and second meeting, and nominations from the floor. Two members were added during the project course. The mix of interests in the Committee were robust and sufficient to represent the watershed.

Table 1. Spring Creek Watershed Partnership Steering Committee Members

Committee Member	Member Organization	Interest Represented
Becky Martinez	Bayou Land Conservancy	Community Organizations
Bobby Martin	Harris County Precinct 4	Counties
Brian Koch	Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board	Agriculture
Diana Foss	Texas Parks and Wildlife Department	Environmental
Mac Martin	Texas A&M Forest Service	Other Interests
Monte Parks	Harris County Precinct 4	Counties
Paul Nelson	Woodlands GREEN	Residents
Teri MacArthur	The Woodlands Township	Cities/Townships
Tom Douglas	Bayou Preservation Association	Community Organizations

Work Groups

The WPP covers a diverse geographic area, and a broad range of land uses, interests, and water quality issues. The Partnership created small, topic-focused Work Groups that met to provide more detailed feedback and recommendations

to Partnership meetings. The Work Groups were open to all interested parties, but participants were encouraged to be regular meeting attendants. The extent of Work Groups was determined by the Stakeholders after the first meetings. Work Groups were formed for:

- Human Sources and Pet Waste; and
- Agriculture, Wildlife, and Invasive Species.

Work Group sessions were well intended and productive throughout the project. Recommendations or guidance from the Work Groups was brought to the next Partnership meeting for consideration by the broader group and Steering Committee.



Figure 2. Spring Creek

III. Communicating with Stakeholders

The cornerstone of the WPP process is beginning and maintaining active, two-way communication with stakeholders, the watershed community, and key partners. H-GAC's approach to communicating with stakeholders was part of a targeted outreach plan which sought to engage a diverse group of stakeholders, secure their commitment to the ongoing process, maintain their interest throughout the process, disseminate information to the public to increase understanding of the project, and coordinate with other efforts in adjacent fields (forestry, flood mitigation, conservation, etc.).

Communication Elements

The guiding principles for the communication strategy was that outreach should be multifaceted, targeted to specific interests as appropriate, consistent in message, accessible, and timely. To meet these goals and principles H-GAC utilized all appropriate communication mechanisms to reach stakeholders and provide ongoing and transparent communication about project progress and needs. These communication means included:

- **Distribution list** – H-GAC maintained a stakeholder list of meeting attendees, key partners identified in prior communications, technical resources, and news media. The list was updated after each meeting or other events as warranted.
- **Email** – the primary means of disseminating meeting information, announcements, requests for comment, etc., was email directly to the stakeholders, unless they requested otherwise. Meeting notifications were sent 30 days in advance of the meeting to the greatest degree practicable.
- **One-on-one calls** – The depth of activity and number of partners in the watershed called for routine check-in conversations with partners. H-GAC made one-on-one calls as needed to get additional information from stakeholders, and coordinate with partners on adjacent efforts.
- **Website** – H-GAC maintained a project website³ to host general project information, meeting announcements, primary project documents, and contact information. The site was updated on at least a quarterly basis, or more frequently as events warranted.
- **Press releases** – prior to the first public meeting of the Partnership, H-GAC released a TCEQ approved press release to local media relevant to the watershed. The release generated a good deal of interest in the project, generating and regular coverage in The Woodlands Community Impact paper.
- **Partner communications networks** – to expand the project's reach, H-GAC worked with several partners (Texas A&M AgriLife, the Woodlands Township, et al.) to promote our projects or shared efforts through their existing communication

³ Project website is found at www.springcreekpartnership.com

networks. This resulted in an effective “force multiplier” for our messages, as demonstrated by good attendance at public events.

Communication Results

The result of the comprehensive outreach strategy outlined in the PPP and implemented during the project was generally successful. Attendance at meetings, and appreciable presence at local events generated additional participants. One-on-one calls and contact with key partners were especially important in light of COVID-19 restrictions as in-person contact was severely limited.



Figure 3. Stakeholders Attending an Outreach Event

IV. Facilitating Watershed Protection Plan Development

The primary purpose of the outreach and engagement activities described in the prior sections is the development of an EPA 9-Element WPP. While H-GAC, TCEQ, and partners sought to integrate and coordinate the effort with adjacent work (flood mitigation, conservation, etc.) as appropriate, the focus of the Partnership’s meetings, technical analyses were to guide stakeholders through the process of identifying causes and sources of pollution in the watershed and developing effective voluntary measures to bring the waterways into compliance with applicable water quality standards.

Partnership Meetings

The Partnership held seven (7) full Partnership meetings between July 2019 and August 2020. Additionally, two (2) sets of Work Group meetings were held to inform decisions by the Partnership in subsequent discussions. The primary pattern of discussion at the Partnership meetings was to introduce a subject (e.g., characterizing sources of fecal contamination) at one meeting where discussion would begin; next, discuss that topic in more depth in Work Group meetings; and finally, bring recommendations back to the next Partnership meeting for further discussion and approval. This process worked well in the Spring Creek WPP project, and there was relatively efficient progress by the stakeholders, without multiple rounds of Work Groups needed for most topics. All meetings started with a brief project review for new participants and a chance for partners to announce their own related events or efforts. The meetings and their topics are described in **Table 2**.



Figure 4. Virtual Meeting Slide

Table 2. Spring Creek Watershed Partnership and Work Group Meetings

Date	Meeting Type	Topics
Jul. 29, 2020	Partnership (virtual)	Project introduction, water quality data review, and invitation to nominate Steering Committee
Oct. 8, 2020	Partnership (virtual)	Steering Committee formation, water quality analysis, and pollution source model review and discussion
Dec. 10, 2020	Partnership (virtual)	Discussion of model revisions, and invitation to join Work Groups
Feb. 8 & 9, 2021	Work Groups (virtual) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human Sources & Pet Waste • Agriculture, Wildlife & Invasives 	Review of water quality improvement strategies commonly implemented throughout the region, and call for suggestions of new implementation measures/ opportunities for collaboration
Mar. 1 & 2, 2021	Work Groups (virtual) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human Sources & Pet Waste • Agriculture, Wildlife & Invasives 	Discussion of project timeline, reduction targets, and water quality improvement solution logistics to recommend to Partnership
Apr. 4, 2021	Partnership (virtual)	Discussion of Work Group recommendations, approval of project timeline, tentative approval of reduction targets and water quality improvement solutions to include in first draft of WPP
Jun. 3, 2021	Partnership (virtual)	Discussion of WPP draft and suggestions for revision
Aug. 3, 2021	Partnership (virtual)	Overview of WPP edits before final agency review

To ensure accessibility, H-GAC disseminated a survey about meeting times to find the best fit for scheduling Partnership and Work Group meetings. All meetings were held virtually out of an abundance of caution with regards to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Meetings were generally structured to enhance interaction, often starting and ending with an informal discussion period where conversation and mingling was encouraged. These more informal sessions were highly valuable in facilitating discussion and coordination between partners.

Coronavirus Response

After widespread restrictions began in March and April 2020 due to the spread of COVID-19, the Partnership convened exclusively in a virtual meeting environment. Participation was steady, with equivalent or larger numbers of participants at each meeting as compared to in person meetings for similar watershed projects. To account for lack of face-to-face conversations with key partners which typically occur during in-person meetings, H-GAC increased its planned one-on-one calls and outreach efforts.

Other Partner Meetings

For a watershed as dense in activity and interests as Spring Creek, holding Partnership meetings was not wholly sufficient to ensure the WPP was well coordinated with other efforts, and to garner as much feedback from topic experts as possible. In addition to the formal meetings with the Partnership and Work Groups, H-GAC and TCEQ facilitated a number of meetings with key partners, both before and during the primary period of public engagement. Some were designed to keep stakeholders up to date, others were to coordinate with key partners on related efforts (e.g., The Woodlands Township, Bayou Land Conservancy, Woodlands GREEN), and still others were to seek specific targeted feedback for project data (e.g., seeking feedback on agricultural populations from the Soil and Water Conservation Districts). More information about the extent of these meetings was provided to TCEQ in quarterly reports

Facilitation Results

Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Partnership worked effectively and efficiently through the WPP development process, providing continuous and meaningful feedback. The Steering Committee voted to approve project progress at key milestones (water quality data results, modeling results, list of recommended solutions, and WPP draft approval). More than sufficient information was provided by the Partnership to shape and complete the Spring Creek WPP. The project enjoyed a highly engaged, diverse stakeholder group that was focused specifically on engaging related and adjacent efforts. To that end, the draft WPP includes substantial information regarding future coordination with forestry, flood mitigation, conservation, and recreational efforts. The Partnership had fewer meetings than originally planned, based on the actual need of the project as it progressed. This is reflective of the efficiency of the group and the focus on targeted partner meetings as a supplement, rather than a lack of sufficient interaction.

V. Public Outreach

The specific development of the WPP was focused on the formal Partnership meetings and targeted meetings with partners. However, the WPP project also included significant priority for general public engagement to raise general awareness among the public (or knowledge for specific topics), support related partner efforts, and attract additional participation for the project. In addition to outreach and education events specifically held by H-GAC and its partners, project staff attended and contributed to a variety of local events, meetings, festivals, and other gatherings. The list of public meetings in **Table 3** is not exhaustive but represents public engagements other than Spring Creek Watershed Partnership meetings, in which H-GAC had a speaking role, booth, or participated in a way other than passive presence. In addition to these events, the project was represented at a variety of regional events and meetings as part of more general promotion of H-GAC programs and efforts or in areas outside the sphere of the watershed.

Table 3. Public Meetings Attended by Project Staff

Event	Date	H-GAC Activity
AccellerateH2O Regional Workshop on Alternative Detention/Retention	9/4/2019, 9/12/2019	Discussed potential flood mitigation/water quality projects with regional partners.
Houston Area Urban Forestry Council	9/9/2019	Promoted forestry and water coordination at a variety of meetings in the quarter.
USACE Houston Watershed Studies Partner Meeting	9/18/2019	Represented this and other projects in discussion with USACE about water quality efforts in their study area.
Woodlands Smarter about Water Seminar	10/5/2019	Gave lecture on water quality, watershed projects, and general water quality issues of the Woodlands area.
Regional Flood Management Committee (H-GAC)	10/16/2019	Represented this and other projects in discussion of flood management efforts and adjacent projects.
Urban Natural Areas national convening (NYC Natural Areas Conservancy)	10/28-31/2019	Represented this and other projects as part of a Houston-area team; presentations focused on riparian restoration and benefits of forestry practices in watersheds and urban areas.
Bayou Preservation Association Annual Symposium	10/30/2019	Represented watershed efforts, maintained a booth with information on the projects.
H-GAC Natural Resources Advisory Committee	11/7/2019	Presented and discussed watershed projects.
Houston Urban Tree Conference	11/15/2019	Presented and discussed water quality/watershed planning and forestry practices; discussed the Lake Houston watersheds as case study.
InvestH2O 2019	12/4/2019	Represented this and other watershed projects; discussed innovative means to spur resilience/water quality projects.

Event	Date	H-GAC Activity
Galveston Bay Estuary Program Water and Sediment Quality Subcommittee Meeting	12/5/2019	Presented and discussed watershed projects.
Cypress Creek Public Meeting	1/16/2020	Presented and discussed watershed projects including promotion of Spring Creek meetings planned for spring 2020.
Natural Resources Advisory Committee Meeting	1/16/2020	Presented and discussed watershed projects.
2020 State of The Bay Symposium	1/22/2020	Presented and discussed watershed projects.
Cypress Creek Work Group Meetings	3/12/2020	Presented and discussed watershed projects including promotion of Spring Creek meetings planned for spring 2020.
Galveston Bay Estuary Program Water and Sediment Quality Subcommittee Meeting	3/4/2020	Presented and discussed watershed projects.
NatureFest (Harris County Precinct 4)	3/7/2020	Managed booth representing this and other watershed projects.
Regional Flood Management Committee Meeting	4/15/2020	Discussed flood mitigation measures for whole region, including project watershed area.
Natural Resources Advisory Committee Meeting	5/7/2020	Presented and discussed watershed projects.
Clean Rivers Program Basin Steering Committee Meeting	5/27/2020	Presented and discussed watershed projects.
Cypress Creek Public Meeting	5/28/2020	Presented and discussed watershed projects including promotion of Spring Creek meetings planned for summer 2020.
Bacteria Implementation Group Spring Meeting	6/2/2020	Presented and discussed watershed projects.
Galveston Bay Estuary Program Water and Sediment Quality Subcommittee Meeting	6/10/2020	Presented and discussed watershed projects.
Regional Flood Management Council Meeting	7/15/2020	Discussed flood mitigation measures for whole region, including project watershed area.
Cypress Creek Watershed Partnership Meeting	8/5/2020	Presented and discussed watershed projects including promotion of Spring Creek meetings planned for fall 2020.
Natural Resources Advisory Committee Meeting	8/6/2020	Presented and discussed watershed projects.
Galveston Bay Estuary Program Water and Sediment Quality Subcommittee Meeting	9/9/2020	Presented and discussed watershed projects.
Regional Flood Management Council Meeting	10/21/2020	Discussed flood mitigation measures for whole region, including project watershed area.
Natural Resources Advisory Committee Meeting	11/5/2020	Presented and discussed watershed projects.
Galveston Bay Estuary Program Water and Sediment Quality Subcommittee Meeting	12/9/2020	Presented and discussed watershed projects.
Regional Flood Management Council Meeting	1/20/2021	Discussed flood mitigation measures for whole region, including project watershed area.

Event	Date	H-GAC Activity
Natural Resources Advisory Committee Meeting	2/4/2021	Presented and discussed watershed projects.
Galveston Bay Estuary Program Water and Sediment Quality Subcommittee Meeting	3/10/2021	Presented and discussed watershed projects.
Regional Flood Management Council Meeting	4/15/2021	Discussed flood mitigation measures for whole region, including project watershed area.
Natural Resources Advisory Committee Meeting	5/6/2021	Presented and discussed watershed projects.
Clean Rivers Program – Basin Steering Committee Meeting	6/2/2021	Presented and discussed watershed projects.
Clean Rivers Program – Regional Monitoring Work Group Meeting	6/8/2021	Presented and discussed watershed projects.
Galveston Bay Estuary Program Water and Sediment Quality Subcommittee Meeting	6/9/2021	Presented and discussed watershed projects.
Regional Flood Management Council Meeting	7/21/2021	Discussed flood mitigation measures for whole region, including project watershed area.
Natural Resources Advisory Committee Meeting	8/5/2021	Presented and discussed watershed projects.

Public Outreach Results

Project staff had a wealth of speaking opportunities with partners and other community organizations throughout the project and gave regular updates at our own regional meetings and related boards and organizations. Not fully detailed above are the additional public meetings (City Councils, Boards, etc.) that H-GAC attended in a passive role and larger regional events (Houston area Boy Scout Fair, etc.) at which H-GAC had a presence and watershed information but were not specific to a Spring Creek focus. H-GAC intends to focus on additional public outreach between the writing of this report and the end of the project in May, 2021, to support the approval of the draft WPP and foster early implementation and public outreach.

VI. Education and Outreach Events

In addition to H-GAC speaking engagements and presence at local events, H-GAC hosted, or cohosted with partner agencies, a series of education and outreach events specifically targeted at watershed needs. Due to delays caused by COVID-19, some events will be completed subsequent to this report. The events are detailed in **Table 4**.

Table 4. Education and Outreach Events Hosted by H-GAC and Partners

Event	Date	H-GAC Activity
Woodlands GREEN Lecture Series	3/25/2021	Partnered with the Woodlands GREEN to give a lecture on watershed dynamics, water quality concerns, and community engagement.
H-GAC Clean Waters Initiative Workshop	8/26/2021	Presented and discussed watershed projects; invited Spring Creek Partnership to attend as workshop was focused on watershed-based plan implementation measures and resources offered by H-GAC.
The Woodlands Township Environmental Services Watershed Project: The Pet Waste Problem	9/18/2021	Partnered with the Woodlands Township to put on an outdoor education event; topics covered included general watershed knowledge, sources of fecal waste pollution, watershed stewardship, and pet waste management.



Figure 5. Stakeholders Accessing Outreach Materials

VII. Summary

The Spring Creek WPP project implemented a robust series of public participation processes, ranging from formal Partnership meetings to informal conversations. The end result of this ongoing set of efforts was an active and engaged stakeholder group and firm connections with adjacent efforts by key partners. These efforts form a foundation for future implementation. Challenges in 2020 brought on by a general halt to public activities during the coronavirus pandemic required the project to pivot in format or delay some activities. Specifically, some of the H-GAC hosted outreach and education events are on hold until later in the project term. However, H-GAC presence was robust in local events throughout the project period.

Subsequent to this report, H-GAC will continue to engage the project stakeholders and general public as needed to support the implementation of the approved WPP and coordinate with other local efforts.



Figure 6. Sunset in the Watershed