

West Lake Houston Basin Implementation Project

Public Participation Plan



West Lake Houston Basin Implementation Project Public Participation Plan

February 23, 2023



Public participation opportunities are related to implementation of Watershed Protection Plans for the West Fork San Jacinto River, Lake Creek, Cypress Creek, and Spring Creek watersheds of Harris, Waller, Montgomery, and Grimes counties, Texas. This Public Participation Plan has been developed by the Houston-Galveston Area Council in cooperation with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, based on elements of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's *Handbook for Developing Watershed Plans to Restore and Protect Our Waters*. Funding for this implementation project is provided through a federal Clean Water Act §319(h) grant to the Houston-Galveston Area Council, administered by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A. PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PLAN

The purpose of this Public Participation Plan (PPP) is to facilitate involvement of basin area stakeholders in the implementation of watershed protection plans (WPPs) for the Lake Creek, West Fork San Jacinto River, Spring Creek, and Cypress Creek watersheds. The PPP defines how Houston-Galveston Area (H-GAC) project staff will provide opportunities for public participation, engage stakeholders, and communicate with project partners and the public to promote implementation efforts.

The objectives of this PPP are to:

- 1) Discuss the project and issues the PPP is designed to support (Section 1)
- 2) Identify public participation opportunities for the project (Section 2)
- 3) Establish means and methods for targeted outreach to engage the public (Section 3)

B. BACKGROUND

The West Lake Houston basin area is comprised of watersheds for Lake Creek, West Fork San Jacinto River, Spring Creek, and Cypress Creek. The total drainage area covers approximately 1,250 square miles of Harris, Waller, Montgomery, and Grimes counties. Lake Creek, Spring Creek, and Cypress Creek each form a confluence with the West Fork of The San Jacinto River which drains into Lake Houston (**Figure 1**). Each watershed is comprised of classified segments, unclassified segment tributaries, and a network of natural and manmade drainage channels.

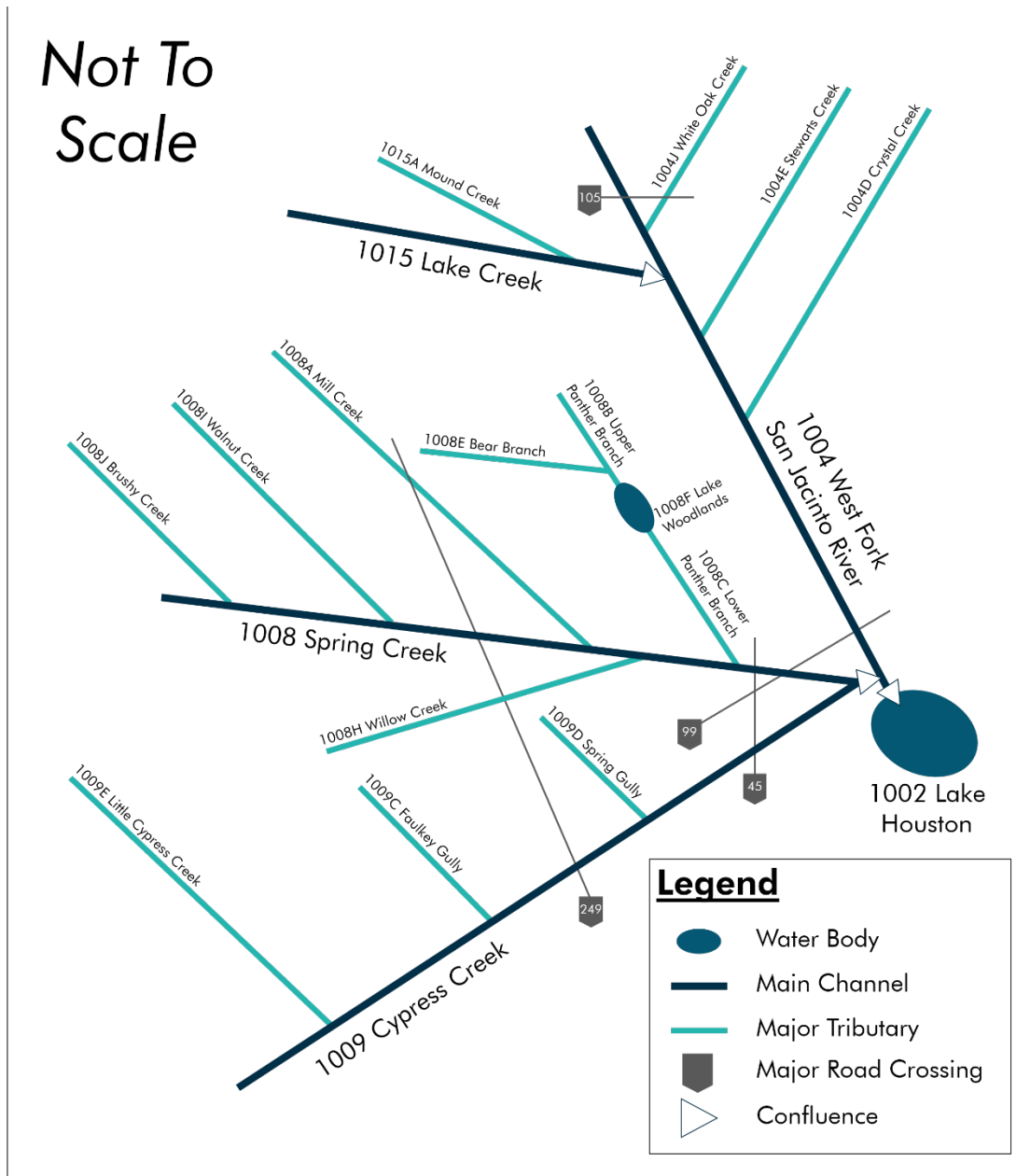


Figure 1 - Network Diagram of the West Lake Houston System

Land cover in the basin area varies (Figure 2). In the watershed area for the West Fork of the San Jacinto River, land is characterized by developed areas especially near the Interstate 45 corridor and around the city of Conroe. These developed areas are surrounded by forest. In the Lake Creek watershed, developed areas hemmed in by forest persist south of Lake Conroe, but give way to a mix of forest and pasture/grassland toward the western edge of Montgomery County and into Grimes County. The Spring Creek watershed is characterized by highly developed areas surrounding the Woodlands Township and stretching along the Interstate 45 corridor. West of State Highway 249, the Spring Creek watershed land cover is more of a mix of forest and pasture/grassland. The Cypress Creek watershed is the most heavily developed of all the watersheds as it overlaps with urban areas in north Harris County. West of State Highway 290, there is a sudden shift to rural land cover such as

pasture/grassland and some cultivated cropland. Development is expected to expand as growing populations push north from the Houston area along the major transportation corridors. Smaller cities such as Cut and Shoot, Magnolia, Oak Ridge North, Panorama Village, Pinehurst, Prairie View, Porter Heights, Shenandoah, Stagecoach, Waller, Willis, and Woodloch intersect or are completely contained within the basin area. Larger cities that intersect or are contained within the basin area include Conroe, Houston, Humble, Spring, The Woodlands Township, and Tomball.

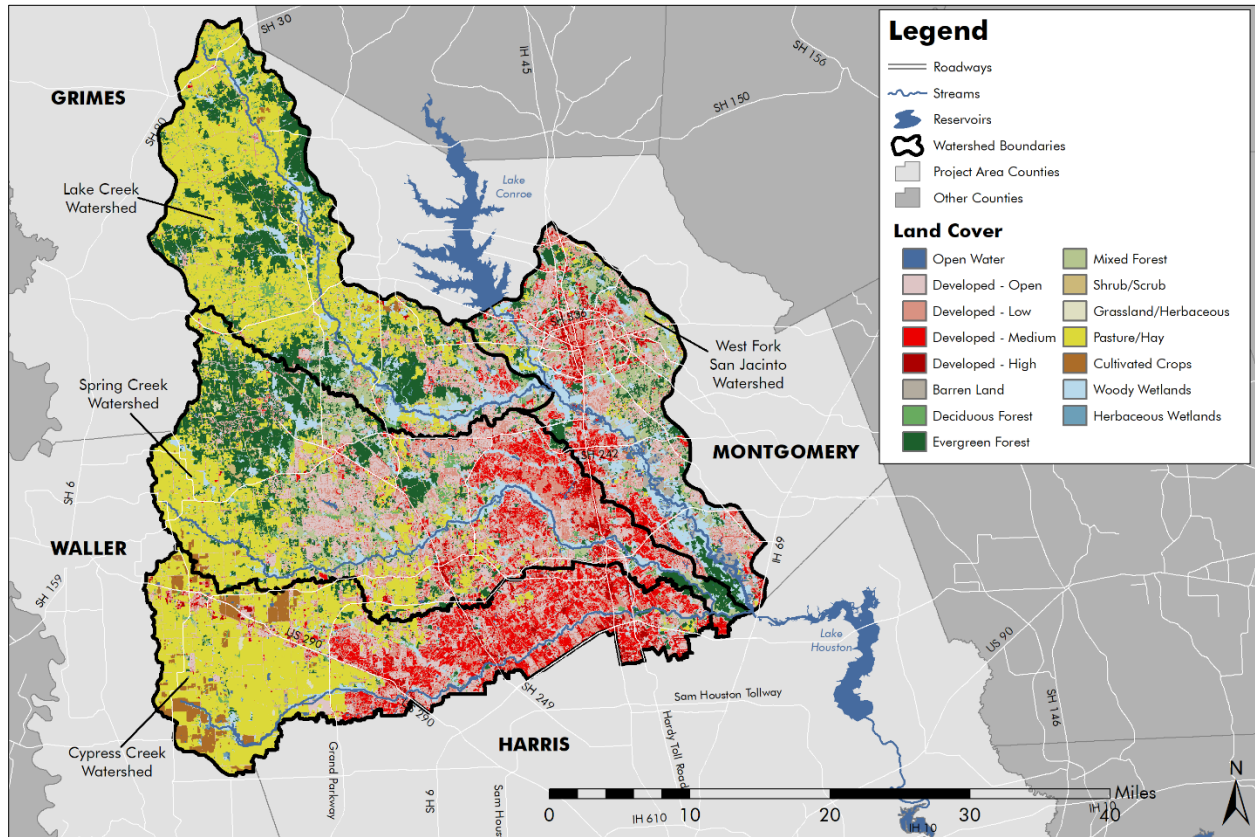


Figure 2 – Land Cover in the West Lake Houston Basin

Based on assessments of water quality summarized by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) in the 2022 *Texas Integrated Report of Surface Water Quality*, the primary water quality issues in the West Lake Houston basin are impairments due to elevated levels of fecal indicator bacteria, and concerns related to depressed dissolved oxygen, high concentrations of nutrients, and occasional issues with poor quality fish and macrobenthic communities and habitat. Other issues identified by stakeholders during preliminary conversations and as part of similar local efforts include sediment loading (from development), changes in flow velocity and volume, illegal dumping, trash, and bank erosion.

Given the wide variety of water quality issues and diverse land uses, an equally diverse set of stakeholder interests exists in the basin. There is strong existing support among active community groups, regional agencies, and local governments for addressing the water quality issues in the basin. Previous efforts by local governments, conservation organizations, and other project participants in urban and agricultural programs provide an existing network of interested parties. **This PPP is designed to guide the public outreach aspects of the project.**

C. GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE IMPLEMENTATION PROJECT

The Implementation Project

The goal of the West Lake Houston Implementation Project is to actively implement elements of area WPPs to address pollutant sources through coordinated voluntary measures. The goal of these activities is to move the component watersheds toward achieving and maintaining compliance with applicable water quality standards and address other stakeholder concerns. Engaging a diverse set of local stakeholders is fundamental to the success of these efforts.

D. TIMEFRAME

The coordination of implementation efforts is planned as a three-year process, beginning in fall 2022, and ending in August 2025.

A portion of the first year will be used to gather and assess water quality data to update an existing characterization study and to reinforce partnerships with local groups, governments, and other interested parties. Initial public outreach and meetings will be held during this period, which will be crucial to disseminating the latest information to a varied and representative group of stakeholders. Finally, implementation efforts will begin and will involve coordination between H-GAC and the project area partners.

Subsequent years will continue with a focus on public engagement and the coordination of implementation activities.

2. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION ROLES AND OPPORTUNITIES

A. OVERVIEW

H-GAC, in conjunction with TCEQ, will seek to communicate with and engage the general public and key stakeholders in ways appropriate to their respective roles via the following primary avenues for public participation:

- Direct communication between H-GAC and key area partners to coordinate implementation.
- Broader outreach in public meetings to provide updates on progress and receive feedback.
- Facilitation of outreach and education events and opportunities throughout the basin area.

B. GENERAL PARTICIPATION

Public involvement is an important aspect of implementing WPPs. It spreads knowledge about basin issues, develops engaged stakeholders, cultivates familiarity with the project, and helps support related partner efforts.

H-GAC will provide opportunities for general participation by:

- Disseminating project and event information and updates on multiple media platforms.
- Hosting regular project update meetings that are open to the public.
- Holding, or maintaining a staff presence at related events in the basin.
- Conducting direct outreach and education.
- Supporting partner efforts that involve the public.

C. COORDINATING WITH KEY PARTNERS

Many stakeholder organizations are pursuing similar or complementary efforts in the West Lake Houston basin. These potential partners include local, regional, and state governments, community groups and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs), agricultural agencies, *etc.* Many of the activities of these groups can have direct or indirect benefits for the aims of the project (e.g., local municipalities controlling pollution through stormwater permit activities). While these groups may also choose to participate directly in the project, it is also important to coordinate the efforts of the project with their pre-existing or planned activities. This may help share resources, increase efficiency, reach additional audiences, and achieve mutually beneficial ends.

In addition to the efforts aimed at general participants, H-GAC will promote participation of key partners through:

- Identifying all current or known planned activities that potentially overlap with the project.
- Maintaining one-to-one communication with key partners.
- Developing and coordinating roles for implementation.

3. TARGETED OUTREACH PLAN

A. OVERVIEW

H-GAC's primary role in the project is as a direct purveyor of events and outreach and as a coordinator with partners. The size and diversity of the project area call for a comprehensive outreach plan. This section delineates the strategies, tools, and methods H-GAC will use to foster participation by local stakeholders and partners.

The goals of this targeted outreach plan are to develop and employ the means to:

- Engage a diverse group of local stakeholders.
- Disseminate information to the general public to increase understanding.
- Drive participation in public events.
- Coordinate as appropriate with partners and related, adjacent efforts like flood mitigation, urban forestry, habitat conservation, etc.

The success of the direct efforts and coordination with local partners will rely on early, frequent, and continual communication. Focus will be given to ensuring continued participation in implementation activities.

B. PRELIMINARY ENGAGEMENT

Prior to engaging with the public on a broad and regular basis, project staff are proposing to meet with the following key partners to identify current programs, future plans, concerns, or recommendations for the WPP implementation process, and to generally smooth the transition into the project. These meetings will take place in Quarter (Q) 3 and Q4 of Fiscal Year (FY) 23.

The preliminary engagement meetings will include, but not be limited to:

- Harris County and associated precincts
- Waller County and associated precincts
- Grimes County and associated precincts
- Montgomery County and associated precincts
- Harris County Flood Control District
- Local governments
- Municipal utility districts and local neighborhood organizations
- US and State Forest Service
- Conservation Groups
- Local Soil and Water Conservation Districts

In addition to these key partners, H-GAC will also engage the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board (TSSWCB), United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS), Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), Texas Department of Transportation (TXDOT) and other state and regional agencies to advise them of the project. H-GAC will continue to maintain a presence and represent the project at local and regional groups including the Watershed Coordinators Roundtable, TSSWCB Watershed Coordinator Steering Committee, Galveston Bay Estuary Program (GBEP) Water and Sediment Quality Subcommittee, and other appropriate professional organizations.

C. STAKEHOLDER IDENTIFICATION AND CONTACT

H-GAC will begin compiling a stakeholder list from recent WPP development efforts in each of the West Lake Houston basin's watersheds and participants in other related H-GAC and partner projects.

Project staff will use existing contact databases for these projects and local officials as a starting point. In evaluating the preliminary list, H-GAC will identify any gaps and seek to fill them. After preliminary engagement meetings, H-GAC will seek to engage the broader set of stakeholders through the tools discussed in Section D. Whenever possible, H-GAC will seek to expand our network through existing contacts.

D. CONTACT TOOLS

H-GAC will use a series of tools to provide active and passive outreach opportunities for project stakeholders and the public. To ensure a unified and coordinated message, H-GAC will seek to coordinate media releases across all platforms (e.g., concurrent messaging for a meeting would appear via email and on the website on the same day and have the same or similar content as a press release). Content of, and changes to, all contact tools and materials will be approved by TCEQ prior to use. To promote project familiarity, consistent logos, design, and themes will be used as branding for the project.

Distribution List

H-GAC will maintain a distribution list that includes all known contacts for the project. The distribution list will, to the greatest degree practicable, include both emails and physical addresses. The list will be organized in such a way as to be able to index and query information effectively. The list will include, but not be limited to, elected officials and staff of local governments, local community organizations, local agricultural representatives, media contacts, state and regional government representatives, interested residents and landowners, local businesses and industry, and all other interested parties.

Email

H-GAC will use email as the primary means for project communication. Physical mail will be used upon request, in absence of email contacts, or for certain official notifications to governments. H-GAC will use an email management system (Constant Contact or equivalent) to send messages in a professional format. All return email will be directed to the H-GAC project manager unless specific circumstances warrant other recipients.

Website

At a minimum, the project website will host all public project documents, meeting materials for upcoming and past public meetings, information about the project, and contact information for the H-GAC project manager. The intended purpose of the website is to serve as a central repository for project materials, accessible to all stakeholders, and as an outreach/notification tool.

Project Summary

H-GAC has developed, and will update, a one-page project summary to use as a leave-behind for interested stakeholders and to disseminate to the public at events. The printed summary will be left with

all stakeholders H-GAC meets with, and a digital version of the summary will be hosted on the website and other appropriate online venues. As the project progresses, the summary will be updated. The summary will be supplemented by an executive summary document at the conclusion of the project. A copy of the current summary is included as Appendix A.

Press Releases

H-GAC will initiate press releases to all relevant press contacts, social media, and internal newsletters in the contact database for events and outreach efforts, and other stories of particular interest. Press releases will be developed in H-GAC standard press release format to ensure acceptability to local media outlets and will be approved in advance of publication by TCEQ.

Partner Outreach Tools

Whenever possible, H-GAC will seek to disseminate information through established partner communication tools and networks (community newsletters, bill inserts, etc.) H-GAC will request that partners disseminate H-GAC materials and will work with partners to produce content for partner publications.

Presence at Local Events

H-GAC will seek to participate in local events or meetings at which good exposure to interested stakeholders is expected. Examples include briefing local governments and maintaining a booth at local environmental events.

Targeted Contacts

While the project will focus on a holistic approach to watershed management, there are times when specific messages will be targeted to specific stakeholder groups. In these cases, a variety of tools may be used to craft and disseminate a message specific to the interests of these groups.

In cases where targeted contact and messaging is used, H-GAC will ensure full transparency is still maintained. In no case will H-GAC misrepresent the goals and extent of the project, and all focused materials will include links or references to broader project resources. Targeted messages are developed to find and focus on shared values and goals, not to limit transparency.

E. PUBLIC MEETINGS

Outside of targeted coordination meetings with key partners, the stakeholder participation process will consist of regular (at least annual) project update meetings open to the public. Public meetings will be advertised and conducted in a way to maximize transparency and inclusion. The focus of the meetings will be to share progress on WPP implementation and receive feedback from stakeholders. Additional meetings may be called as needed.

Meeting Schedule

Public meetings to share project updates or provide outreach opportunities will be scheduled for times that best suit stakeholder needs. If stakeholder preference or inclement conditions dictate that meetings should be held virtually, a survey will be used to assess stakeholder availability.

Meeting Locations

H-GAC will work with stakeholders to determine preferences for in-person or virtual meetings and locate the best meeting locations in the basin. It is expected that multiple locations will be used throughout the process to ensure basin-wide participation.

Advertising/Announcements

Advertising for public meetings will be approved in advance by TCEQ and will be disseminated to all channels appropriate to that meeting at least 30 days prior to the meeting date, unless specific circumstances dictate otherwise. Reminders will typically be sent out two weeks, one week, and one day in advance of the meeting.

Conduct

Conduct at meetings will follow the ground rules discussed in Appendix B.

Feedback

Every meeting will have at least 15 minutes set aside for public comment and feedback. In general, meetings will be conducted such that feedback and discussion is encouraged throughout the meeting. Project staff will record any feedback and follow up within one week on any stakeholder questions or requests. Substantive feedback will be reflected in meeting minutes.

Meeting Materials

All meetings will have, at a minimum, an established agenda and will be summarized. Meeting summaries will be posted to the website. All materials will be available to the public.

F. OTHER PUBLIC OUTREACH OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to targeted coordination and public meetings, H-GAC will seek to provide the public and project stakeholders with opportunities to expand their knowledge or become more engaged in basin efforts. These interim experiences provide a break from the meeting schedule and foster a broader sense of community for stakeholders.

Texas Stream Team

Volunteer water quality monitors through Texas Stream Team are actively engaged in the health of their waterways. H-GAC maintains the Texas Stream Team program for this area which will seek to expand existing monitors and include them in project efforts.

Texas Watershed Stewards

Texas Watershed Stewards (TWS) is a science-based watershed education program designed to help residents identify and take action to address local water quality impairments. The program has been implemented through the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service (AgriLife) and TSSWCB. TWS workshops are one-day, 8-hour events. The focus is public participation in local watershed management. The program is open to all basin residents, including homeowners, business owners, agricultural producers, decision makers, community leaders, and all other citizens. H-GAC will encourage AgriLife to host a TWS workshop in the basin in the early phase of this process. The goal is to engage as many residents as possible in the project and empower them to make informed decisions.

Other Programs

H-GAC will work with AgriLife and other entities to evaluate the possibility of holding additional workshops in the basin during the project term. Topics of specific interest include established programs highlighting feral hogs, soil health, onsite sewage facilities, urban forestry, water quality aspects of flood mitigation, and riparian corridors. H-GAC will seek to hold or coordinate on a meeting specifically for agricultural producers to introduce them to programs and incentives available from TSSWCB, AgriLife, and USDA-NRCS or similar agencies.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: PROJECT SUMMARY

As described in Section 3, H-GAC has developed a one-page summary of the basin project as an outreach tool. The following is the current version, which is expected to be updated regularly.

Implementation of Watershed Protection Plans in the West Lake Houston Basin



Legend

Watershed Areas	Other Features
Cypress Creek	Streams
Lake Creek	Reservoirs
Spring Creek	Watershed Counties
West Fork San Jacinto River	Other Counties

0 10 20 30 40 Miles

Project Area

The waterways of the West Lake Houston Basin drain an area of over 1,250 square miles covering portions of Grimes, Harris, Montgomery, and Waller counties.

Water Quality

High levels of fecal waste, low dissolved oxygen, and high nitrogen and phosphorus levels are common water quality issues in the basin. These challenges can affect public health, local economies, and the environment.

Taking Action

Watershed protection plans have been developed for all of the waterways in the West Lake Houston Basin. These plans identify voluntary strategies and public outreach efforts designed to reduce water pollution. Through this implementation project, H-GAC will support local partners and stakeholders in implementing these solutions, identifying funding resources, and continuing to monitor the health of the waterways.

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APPENDIX B: GROUND RULES

As described in Section 3, H-GAC has prepared a set of ground rules to ensure civil and fruitful discussion in public participation opportunities. These ground rules set the tone, expectation, and desired outcomes for the stakeholder meetings and participation. These ground rules will be reviewed, potentially revised, and approved by the stakeholders.

West Lake Houston Implementation Project Ground Rules

The following are the ground rules for the West Lake Houston Implementation Project (Project) agreed to and approved by the stakeholders of the Project. Participants in the Project's public meetings, events, and discussions agree to follow these ground rules.

Goals

The goal of the Project is to implement strategies in recently developed watershed protection plans (WPPs) to improve and protect the water quality of the West Fork of the San Jacinto River, Lake Creek, Spring Creek, Cypress Creek, and their tributaries. This goal will be achieved through coordination with key partners of the Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) and the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ).

General Conduct

Participants in the Project's meetings, events, or other facilitated discussions agree to follow a general code of conduct. By attending meetings or participating in discussions, participants agree to:

- Represent their viewpoints without personal attacks or uncivil speech.
- Respect other speakers by not interrupting them.
- Respect the process by not disrupting meetings. Expressing differing viewpoints is encouraged, disrupting the process is not.
- Be honest in all information shared, including avoiding dishonesty by omission.
- Address any concerns about the conduct of other participants with H-GAC and TCEQ.
- Refrain from speaking in the name of the Project or other members unless authorized to do so.
- Seek to find areas of common value and promote consensus.

Public Meetings

The following are the expectations for all meetings held by the Project:

- **Accessible and Open to the Public** – All meetings of the Project are open to the public, and all interested stakeholders are encouraged and welcomed to participate. Meetings will be held, to the greatest extent possible, in locations accessible to stakeholders.
- **Prior Notice** – Stakeholders will receive notice of meetings, or changes thereof, at least 30 days prior to the meeting date. Notice may be less than 30 days if there are extenuating circumstances (inclement weather cancellations, unforeseen change in time or location, etc.). H-GAC will use every practical means to ensure stakeholders are aware of meeting status change.
- **Respectful of Time** – H-GAC will start and end meetings at the times on the agenda.

- **Meeting Documents** – Meeting documents will be sent with meeting notices and be made publicly available electronically by H-GAC. Mailed materials can be sent by specific request, but digital documents will be the default. Meeting documents include an agenda, minutes from the previous meeting(s), and any other relevant information needed for the meeting.
- **Open Discussion** – Meetings will be conducted such that open discussion, questions, and feedback are allowed throughout. However, there may be times during presentations or when other stakeholders are speaking, that stakeholders will be requested to hold their questions/comments until later.

Structure

The Project is composed of three participation levels: General Stakeholders, Facilitators, and Technical Advisors.

- **General Stakeholders** are stakeholders who attend meetings and provide information.
- **Facilitators** are H-GAC and TCEQ who serve the Project by funding the process, arranging meetings, facilitating conversation, providing data for decisions, creating project materials, and coordinating implementation.
- **Technical Advisors** are members of state and federal agencies, or other entities who serve the Project by lending expertise to conversations and coordinating with other efforts.

Participants agree to respect this organizational structure. Regardless, everyone at the meetings is welcome to participate and encouraged to make their voice heard.

Approval

These ground rules were drafted by the H-GAC and TCEQ and presented to the stakeholders for their review, possible revision, and adoption. Once adopted, all participants will be responsible for abiding by these ground rules.

The ground rules, as detailed above, were reviewed and approved by the stakeholders of the West Lake Houston Implementation Project on

_____.