



STRATEGIC PLAN
JANUARY 2022 – DECEMBER 2027

Presented for Board Approval

January 14, 2022

To: Nueces River Authority Board of Directors

Date: January 14, 2022

Re: Strategic Plan – January 2022 – December 2027

When we began the strategic planning process, I was reminded of what I have heard spoken at the beginning of many planning efforts, “If you are unsure of where you are going, any road will get you there.” I believe this statement to be very true and I agreed that NRA was in need of vision of where we were to go. I also wanted a plan that not only reflected our vision, but one that would exhibit our **passion**, and specify our **purpose** as we continue to **progress** our established legacy into the future. **Passion, Purpose, and Progress**, past, present, and future.

To develop the plan, your staff took time to visit with the entities and stakeholders in the basin to identify their needs while matching to the needs of NRA, to propose a plan that would provide for improvements. I believe this plan does that. It conveys our passion, provides our purpose, and frames a path for progress into the future. It will be our objective to use this plan to build upon our legacy to experience new growth and opportunity, while remaining true to our statues and mission.

I believe the plan is clear as it demonstrates our strategic vision and commitment to the entities and people who populate the Nueces basin and depend on the protection of one of its most valuable resources, our water. As you read the strategic plan, I hope you are revitalized by the mission that was create for the Nueces River Authority 87 years ago by the Texas Legislature and are excited as well as by our vision guided by our principals, purpose, ethical behavior and hard work of our Board of Directors and employees of the organization.

As your Executive Director, I pledge to follow the strategic planning initiative to develop implementation and metrics for providing cost-effective services to our populace while maintaining the highest standards of protection for the environment. I look forward to our future and to leading the amazing team of professionals as we progress in making a greater impact in the next 5 years and beyond.

The attached plan is respectfully submitted for your review and approval.

Sincerely,

John J. Byrum II
Executive Director

Our Past

BACKGROUND

The Nueces River Authority (NRA) was created in 1935 by an Act of the First Called Session of the 44th Legislature. Originally named Nueces River Conservation and Reclamation District, it was created to function under Article 16, Section 59 of the Texas Constitution, pursuant to Chapter 427 as a political subdivision of the State of Texas. The District's name was changed in by the 62nd Session of the Texas Legislature in 1971.

Although a state agency, NRA has no authority to enforce, power to issue permits or regulate. NRA does not receive any state or federal appropriations of tax revenues. The source of NRA's revenue is generated through contracted services.

NRA is governed by a 21-member Board of Directors. Each Director is appointed by the Governor with advice and consent of the Texas Senate. By statute, the Board is comprised of 4 members who are residents of Nueces County, two members who are residents of San Patricio County, and two members who are residents of Jim Wells County. Not more than 4 persons who reside in Nueces County, and not more than two persons who reside in any other county may be appointed to or serve on the board at the same time. Members serve staggered six-year terms with one-third of the directors taking office on February 1st of each odd numbered year.

CHARGE

The responsibilities granted to the NRA have not changed since the organization was enabled in 1935. NRA had broad authority to:

- ❖ Preserve, protect, and develop water resources;
- ❖ Provide for flood control, irrigation, navigation, wastewater treatment, solid waste disposal; municipal and industrial water supply, and water-quality control;
- ❖ Develop parks and recreational facilities;
- ❖ Finance water supply, water treatment, and pollution-control projects, and;
- ❖ Receive stated and federal grants and loans.

JURISDICTIONAL AREA

NRA's jurisdiction includes all of part of 22 South Texas Counties which include over 17,500 square miles. Beginning in the north at Rocksprings and extending to the Gulf of Mexico, the basin is approximately 235 miles long and 115 miles in width, encompassing large parts of the Texas Hill Country, the Texas Brush Country, and Coastal Plains. Counties include Edwards, Real, Bandera, Kinney, Uvalde, Medina, Bexar, Maverick, Zavala, Frio, Atascosa, Wilson, Karnes, Dimmit, La Salle, McMullen, Live Oak, Webb, Duval, Jim Wells, San Patricio, and Nueces. Population within the basin is estimated at just under 1 million full time residents but many more visit the area seasonally for recreation.

THE BASIN

The basin consists of three uniquely different areas.

The **Upper Basin** is known as the Hill Country. This part of the basin consist of approximately 3,100 square miles and the land is used mostly for grazing, with the pristine headwater streams being know for fishing, hunting, camping, and water recreation. The Edwards Aquifer and its recharge zone traverse this region with about 60 percent of the recharge occurring in this area of the Nueces Basin.

The **Middle Basin** is known as the Brush Country. This part of the basin begins just south of the Hill Country and continues to within approximately 60 miles of the Gulf of Mexico coastline. This area is known for its farming, ranching, hunting and oil and gas production. Much of the region is dependent upon water from the Nueces, Frio and Atascosa rivers and the Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer, which receives its recharge from many of these streams within this section of the Nueces Basin. The Brush Country makes up more than 80 percent of the basin.

The **Lower Basin** is known as the Coastal Bend. It includes an approximately 60-mile corridor along the Gulf of Mexico including Nueces and adjoining coastal basins. This area is known for its farming, oil production and refining, chemical manufacturing, shipping, commercial fishing, military bases, and coastal recreation. This region is profoundly affected by the flows of the Nueces River. The streams of this area also contribute to recharge of the Gulf Coast Aquifer.

HISTORY

The Authority issued pollution control bonds, managed the construction of Choke Canyon Reservoir and the construction of the Mary Rhodes Pipeline to protect and develop water supplies for the Coastal Bend region.

Leading into 2020, the NRA's primary functions included:

- 1) Implementation of the Clean River Program, a water quality monitoring program, under contract with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and associated water quality planning and special aquatic testing and studies in the Nueces River, the Nueces Rio-Grande, and Nueces-San Antonio basins.
- 2) Water supply planning through involvement in three regional water planning groups.
- 3) Water supply conservation and development through its 20 percent ownership of water rights in the 139,000 acre-feet Choke Canyon Reservoir constructed in 1983.
- 4) Organizing regional wastewater treatment for the rapidly growing recreational areas on the upper Frio River around Leakey.
- 5) Legislative and regulatory involvement related to water resource protection, including the passage of S.B. 155 which prohibited the operation of a motor vehicle in protected freshwater areas; and
- 6) Providing targeted educational and resource protection programing; including aquatic invasive species control, classroom water stewardship training, litter prevention and riparian conservation.

Although NRA had successful past of providing services in the Nueces River Basin, the 86th Legislature in 2019 noted the lack of a strategic plan to guide NRA's future efforts. This document addresses that need.

Our Future

VISION

The goals of the plan are driven by the following initiatives:

- 1) Greater education and engagement of stakeholders about the condition and value of our water resources and NRA's role and purpose their protection and development.
- 2) Manage and develop facilities across the basin to address sustainability in water resource practices.
- 3) Maintain and improve business practices of the NRA.
- 4) Strengthen NRA's relationships and partnerships to maintain and facilitate economic success.
- 5) Become a trusted leader in providing governmental operation and financial services.

GOALS

Goal 1 A: Preserve and Improve Water Quality *through monitoring, data collection and aquatic studies*

Objectives:

- 1) *Increase water quality monitoring and data collection basin wide*

NRA has contracted with TCEQ to implement the Texas Clean Rivers Program in the Nueces and adjoining coastal basins since 1998. Water quality data collected and evaluated by NRA and stakeholder engagement in the monitoring program is of increasing value and in demand as water quality problems arise and projects to address them are developed. NRA will continue to collect and provide high quality sampling data to TCEQ and under contract to other organizations. NRA will seek funding to expand and target water quality monitoring as needs emerge.

Goal 1 B: Preserve and Enhance Water Quality *through education and resource protection advocacy*

Objectives:

- 1) *Increase educational opportunities basin wide.*

NRA provides high quality classroom educational programs for elementary students under contract with participating groundwater conservation districts, school districts and others. NRA will seek funding to expand this highly successful, award winning, classroom education program basin wide and into the coastal basins.

- 2) *NRA will work to promote the protection of the unique "pristine streams" within the Basin.*

Only a few stream segments within NRA's jurisdiction remain "pristine," without identified water quality impairments. NRA will enhance efforts to educate and advocate for their protection with local civic groups, riparian landowners, regulatory agencies, and community leaders.

- 3) *Promote rules and laws to ensure the quality of the remaining pristine streams in Texas.*

There are currently no direct wastewater discharges permitted by TCEQ in the headwater watersheds of the Nueces basin. Wastewater discharge to these streams, which are typically spring fed and nutrient deficient, would degrade their pristine quality. NRA will work with interested parties to influence regulatory agencies and educate the Texas Legislature, encouraging them to enact laws and regulations protecting the remaining pristine streams in the Nueces basin and Texas from direct discharge of treated wastewater.

- 4) *Continue leading and expanding the NRA's Up2U (Up to You) litter prevention program.*

Litter and dumping are a continuing and growing visible water quality threat. NRA will expand its successful Up2U litter prevention campaign through local partnerships and funding arrangements. NRA will embrace opportunities for increased Up2U promotion both within and outside the Nueces Basin while protecting the integrity of the Up2U campaign brand.

- 5) *Increase funding relationships and applications to address resource protection opportunities.*

NRA will seek to add staff to search, evaluate and apply for grants for education and resource protection projects.

Goal 1C: Preserve and Improve water quality through land stewardship and invasive species control

Objective:

- 1) *Expand riparian landowner education and programming and aquatic invasive species control projects to protect and enhance riparian function and water quality.*

Native riparian vegetation is key to the healthy function of streams, both in terms of water storage (quantity) and water quality (non-point source pollution prevention). NRA's Remarkable Riparian and PullKillPlant programs are key assets for education and outreach to landowners along streams and drain ways within the river basin and adjacent coastal basins. NRA will continue to expand riparian education and training, promoting the value of riparian function and invasive species control along area streams. NRA will continue to seek funding for programs to control aquatic invasive species like *Arundo donax*, Water hyacinth and Tilapia. These programs will be implemented as funding, support and methodology become available.

Goal 1D: Preserve and Improve Water Quality through wastewater utilities development, enhancement, and operation and OSSF inspection, repair, and replacement.

Objective:

- 1) Promote the NRA's Operator Assistance Program and work with partners to evaluate and develop improved wastewater treatment processes.

Poorly functioning wastewater treatment operations contribute nutrients and bacteria to receiving streams. Many of the identified water quality problems seem to be related to discharge of poorly treated wastewater. NRA will work with plant owners to offer operational assistance, training and facility improvement as needs are identified.

Goal 1 E: Preserve and Improve Water Quality through OSSF inspection, repair, and replacement.

Objective:

- 1) Identify funding for the continued implementation and expansion of NRA's On-site Sewer System inspection, repair, and replacement program.

Failing onsite sewer systems located along stream banks, lake fronts and bays are a growing concern. Many of these facilities are old, failing, and unregulated. NRA has developed a successful repair/replacement program along the Lower Nueces between Lake Corpus Christi and the saltwater barrier dam. As funding becomes available this program will be implemented in other areas with identified need.

Goal 2 A: Conserve and Enhance Water Supplies through providing leadership and participation to three regional water planning groups.

Objectives:

- 1) Work through regional planning group to add resiliency to water supplies through regional flood mitigation strategies.
- 2) Work with others in the middle and upper basin to develop water management strategies to satisfy current deficits.
- 3) Form a coalition of middle and upper basin entities to seek funding and provide emphasis to need.

Regional water plans guide State water project funding and predict water supply needs and strategies to meet future needs. NRA has been an active participant in the development the plans for 3 regions covering the basin. Going forward it will focus on coalition building, strategies to satisfy the projected water supply deficits, and maximum utilization of floodwaters.

Goal 2 B: Conserve and Enhance Water Supplies by provide vigilance over water diversion permits and unpermitted streamflow diversions

Objectives:

- 1) Be always aware of plans and permits that seek additional diversion of flows that are already committed or expected downstream.

Nueces basin flows are fully allocated (and in some respects already over allocated). Still permits are being granted for diversions and many unpermitted diversions exist and are being

expanded. NRA will be vigilant and help focus stakeholder awareness of these diversions and their impact on downstream flows.

Goal 3: Expand Community Services to include all aspects of water supply, wastewater treatment, administration and planning for flood and drought.

Objectives:

- 1) Provide project development, operation, and administration to our communities.

Small communities and rapidly developing rural areas often lack capacity to address utility infrastructure needs. They may lack administrative staff needed to access funding for enhancement or expansion. In other case they may need assistance with technical operations. NRA will assist water and wastewater suppliers to develop, expand, and operate facilities to meet local community needs.

- 2) Provide assistance with Region 13 flood planning and plan implementation.

Flood waters are not always considered for their resource value. NRA will work through regional flood planning group to identify and implement flood management. NRA will work with communities and local governments to remove structures from the flood plain, enhance the functional condition of riparian and wetland areas, implement green infrastructure projects, and encourage beneficial uses for floodwaters.

- 3) Implement Centralized Floodplain Administration services for interested entities within the basin.

Floodplain administration has been a difficult service for some counties and cities to provide. NRA will provide these services on behalf of local governments that need our services. NRA will benefit from the immediate access to growth information within the basin as it relates to flooding and local infrastructure and further ensure that actions taken in the floodplains within the basin do not lead to adverse impacts on neighbors and other downstream communities.

- 4) Within its statutory authority, NRA will seek additional ways to assist communities in addressing their local water resource issues. Including the development and implementation of financial assistance and project management/administrative programs to address issues that our communities are currently not equipped to solve on their own.

A capacity need has been identified among some communities in the following areas –

- Packaging of grant and loan applications to finance water related infrastructure projects
- Utility rate structuring and budgeting
- Provide rate and budgeting assistance
- Administration of capital improvement projects

NRA will develop innovative methods of addressing these needs and assist communities in obtaining funding and administering projects when appropriate and feasible.

- 5) Work with counties on improving road crossings to mitigate river disturbance leading to realignment, flooding, and fish reproduction issues.

Poorly designed stream crossings are creating problems for downstream landowners and fish, especially in the Nueces basin headwaters area. With appropriate funding NRA will partner with local governments and agencies to repair or replace stream crossings.

- 6) NRA will work with local communities to reduce impact of aggregate mining on flooding, streamflow diversion, water quality and threatened ecosystems.

With increasing population and industrial development, Nueces basin headwater streambeds and banks have become convenient locations for aggregate mining. The mining of river gravels and the use of subsurface stream flows needs additional regulation to prevent significant damage to river resources. NRA will work with local governments to seek mitigation strategies to offset the damage these operations have and are expected to cause to surface water resources.

Our Mission

Utilizing our statutory charge to provide trusted services to meet the needs of the people and environment; ensuring that future citizens will have adequate supplies of clean water where both people and wildlife can live, prosper, and enjoy the natural beauty and biologically rich environment of the Nueces River basin.