January 27, 2009

Mr. Con Mims, Chairman
Region L Water Planning Group
P.O. Box 349
Uvalde, TX 78802

Dear Chairman Mims:

It is always a pleasure to work with people who are committed to the improvement of Texas' natural resources, so I was pleased to read Mark Peterson's (SAWS) thoughtful comments regarding Appendix D 2011 Region L – Study 3 Report. He and I agree on several key points.

First, we agree that brush management is an effective land management tool that benefits the water supply when it is done correctly in the appropriate places. Second, because the landscape is dynamic, we both realize that brush management practices will only make positive contributions to the water supply when they are perpetuated. If land stewards aren't vigilant or aren't encouraged to continue their efforts, the brush will re-encroach, rendering previous efforts moot.

With that said, I must respectfully, yet strongly, disagree with Mark's assertion at the end of the second paragraph that: "Even then, a .167 AF/year (54,000 gallons/acre/yield) is not what I call impressive."

Especially in a situation where we are anticipating a water shortfall, everyone would like the number to be larger, but dismissing a net gain of any size could prove to be very short-sighted. At a .167/AF yield (using the number Mark chose from the study), this means that for every 6 acres of cedar shrub land converted to grassland, we gain 1 acre-foot of water. Consider what happens when this net gain is compounded: 6,000 acres = 1,000 AF/year; 600,000 acres = 100,000 AF/year. At an eco-region level, the net gain is impressive because while we cannot make it rain more, we can make the most of the rain we do receive. The yield is not only impressive, the implications for policy-makers can truly be enormous.

In the fourth paragraph, Mark also asserts that brush management is compatible with ranching, but not wildlife management that provides hunting opportunities. While in some instances, recreational landowners have left ranching to pursue hunting activities, most ranchers continue to run both livestock and hunting operations together, therefore diversifying their total income streams.

Furthermore, brush management and hunting are most certainly not incompatible. In many instances, landowners have removed brush to achieve the 40 percent – 60 percent cover that Mark mentions to make their land more suitable for hunting. Of course, the percentage brush cover considered ideal varies with the species that a landowner is managing for. (How much canopy is preferred, for example, by quail?) Regardless of the species, though, landowners in the Edwards Plateau generally leave brush standing on the steep slopes and in the most rugged terrain. Here it helps control erosion as well as providing wildlife habitat.

Additionally, doing what Mark suggests is exactly what the Study's recommendations suggest! Brush management, especially that whose purpose is to benefit water resources, usually should not be accomplished with a "knock it all down" approach. On any given property within the Study's target areas, brush management should only, as previously stated, be undertaken via the proper techniques in the appropriate places. Therefore, we will most likely end up with brush management in those areas

that will improve infiltration without disturbing those areas where it will not. As a result, we, in most instances, end up with 40 – 60 percent cover by design.

And on the subject of brush management and hunting, I have one final comment. Contrary to Mark's assertion, I know of no brush management -- again, done properly in the appropriate places and continued over time -- that does not benefit the hunting operation. The land benefits, water resources benefit, and hunting opportunity and potential income increase with proper brush management, creating the proverbial "win-win" situation.

Throughout the region, landowners are looking for ways to stay on the land. Hunting is one potential revenue stream while producing water is another. The fact that so many people have embraced hunting should be seen as a positive sign that an equal number of people will be open to managing their land for water production if the appropriate, cost-effective incentives are created. It is our job at Region L to recognize and foster those opportunities.

As you know, keeping land in open space is one the biggest challenges we face as a state. While brush encroachment disrupts the water cycle, its impact is minor compared to the sprawl of suburbia with its accompanying streets, sidewalks, rooftops, and parking lots.

I look forward to discussing this issue with you and the other members of the Region L Planning Group. It is an honor to be part of a team that is committed to doing what is best for Texas' natural resources.

Yours for a clean and enjoyable outdoors,

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