



# The Massive Urban-Rural Imbalance in Texas

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Anyone who has heard me speak publicly on natural resource conservation in Texas knows that I invariably bring the discussion around to the enormous urban/rural imbalance that we find ourselves in here in our great state. Texas is a private property state, given our unique history as an independent republic before joining the United States. Therefore, the vast majority of our open spaces are held in private ownership. As our state's economy develops, demographics shift and agricultural practices become more

efficient, our population becomes more and more centralized in urban areas. Today, the state's population is approximately 85 percent urban.

Meanwhile, the working agricultural lands of Texas (farms and ranches) count for over 80 percent of our state's land mass. Alarming, those lands are owned by less than 1 percent of our population. According to Texas A&M University Institute for Renewal Natural Resources, there are about 250,000 working farms and ranches in Texas. When I first heard that statistic,

I was skeptical. But when you think about Texas having 254 counties and that there are several with either no agricultural working lands (think Dallas County) or on the other end of the spectrum just a few owners of large tracts (think Kleberg and Kenedy Counties), that number becomes more reasonable. An average of 1,000 farms or ranches per county seems like a realistic figure. At the same time, our state population is around 27 million people. Assuming there is one owner for each farm or ranch, it is accurate to say that the



working lands of Texas are held by less than 1 percent of our population.

So why does that matter? What does that have to do with advocacy? Consider the fact that there are more state representatives and state senators in Greater Houston than there are west of Interstate Highway 35. The urban areas have the votes and the rural areas have the natural resources. The challenge here is that far too few urban Texans, including Legislators, have a sense of relevancy to our natural resources and their importance. Too few realize that our open spaces are where aquifers are recharged, where our air is filtered, where our food and fiber come from and where all our wild things live and flourish. Here at the Texas Wildlife Association, we work every day to combat what we call “natural resource illiteracy” with education programs, hunting programs and our advocacy programs. But make no mistake; the deck is stacked against us. Nowhere is that more tangibly evident than in the Texas Legislature.

During each Legislative Session, the powerful special interest groups and their lobbyists descend on the Capitol to exert influence on state lawmakers and the policies they set. At the same time, membership organizations, grass root initiatives, technical experts and constituents of all kinds show up to lend

their voices to the process. Our Legislature must represent all interests and strive to arrive at a balance between competing views. I have personally found our State Legislators to be good people that are truly interested in doing right by Texas. But they each view the world through their own lens and that may or may not align with the priorities of rural Texans. Remember, that rural voters are only about 15 percent of our state population.

Wildlife and natural resource conservation issues can be extraordinarily complex, and they almost always involve competing interests, usually between commerce and stewarding the resource. The pace is oftentimes furious during the Legislative Session, so working through complex issues can be difficult. That difficulty is exacerbated when “the other side” is working just as hard, resulting in a lot of confusion that makes informed decision making that much more challenging. An analogy I often use is this: we call on a Legislator’s office to tell them what time it is and end up needing to explain how a clock is built.

This Session, TWA focused its advocacy efforts on three primary issues—defending the integrity of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) management rules recently promulgated by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, pursuing meaningful reform

in eminent domain statutes to provide greater equity to private landowners, and defending the established ownership of groundwater as a private property right.

Unlike previous Sessions, we saw no egregious attacks on the ownership of groundwater. To be sure, there were many bills related to management of groundwater but none were wildly offensive. We were thankful of that but recognize there must be constant vigilance to protect what we already have today.

The eminent domain reform effort was coordinated with many like-minded organizations, most notably our friends at Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association and Texas Farm Bureau. This effort was a perfect example of the friction between urban and rural viewpoints. Opponents to our efforts to level the playing field for landowners include oil and gas, pipelines, power producers, municipalities and many other influential interests. While we know that we have the proverbial “high ground” on the issue, it is enormously difficult to find common ground between landowners and the condemners that want their land. Regardless of the eventual outcome this Session, TWA will continue to fight for what is right for the landowners of our state.

The CWD discussion was a perfect example of the challenges with explaining a complex issue to lawmakers that do not have direct experience in wildlife matters. In one House Committee hearing a Legislator made the comment that “this is like a foreign language.” Too often, the sporting and wildlife community can take what we know for granted as common knowledge. That is a lesson that we must learn from going forward. TWA enjoyed the support of dozens of other conservation groups and together we stood our ground and protected the critical wildlife resource that is our wild deer herd.

If we learn one thing, it should be that rural Texans must all work together. We must be vocal, we must get involved, and we must be organized. I believe there is a solution and that is to help our urban friends understand the importance of all that beautiful open space outside of the city limits, what we call home. Only then, can we begin to rest a little easier. 🍷

