



# Finding Common Ground

## *A Conservation Vision for the Big Bend Region*

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Photo by Ben Masters



The diverse topography of Texas' Big Bend region is home to a plethora of flora and fauna, such as the desert bighorn sheep pictured here in the sky islands of Brewster County.

The Borderlands Research Institute has been a prominent partner in the Respect Big Bend (RBB) coalition since the Cynthia and George Mitchell Foundation initiated the effort in 2019. This large-scale conservation undertaking has brought together scientists, landowners, community members, conservation organizations and energy industry members with the goal of balancing future energy development with values that make this region of the state special.

The RBB coalition's mission is to “inspire and empower stakeholders to conserve the unique resources and protect the iconic communities of the Big Bend Region of Texas while developing energy

responsibly.” The RBB initiative is also supported by the Still Water Foundation, Meadows Foundation, and Permian Basin Area Foundation.

This region is unique in biodiversity, demographics, and communities. From desert scrub and grasslands to high elevation sky islands, the Trans-Pecos supports more than 2,000 plant species, 500 bird species, 170 reptile and amphibian species and 120 mammal species.

While large in area, most of the Trans-Pecos is small in population, with many of the least populated counties in the country. The incredibly intact landscape, along with a diverse topography, provides breathtaking viewsheds and some of the darkest skies in North America. Throw in several small communities like Alpine,

Marfa, and Fort Davis, and one can understand why this area is an ideal place to live and a destination for hundreds of thousands of tourists every year.

However, this relatively pristine region adjoins one of the most energy-intensive places on the planet. The Permian Basin has been recognized as one of the most productive oil and gas plays in the world, but the Trans-Pecos is also valued for its solar and wind potential as well.

The question on the table is: How can we conserve the unique natural and cultural resources of the Trans-Pecos, and still see the economic benefits that energy development can bring to landowners and communities?

To better understand and prepare for potential energy development in



the Big Bend region, the RBB team incorporated the Development by Design process. This method, created by The Nature Conservancy, starts with creating a conservation vision, which can also capture important cultural and social values.

Utilizing the best available science, future development is projected and compared to the values. The resulting spatial tool can estimate possible conflicts, and appropriate mitigation actions can be implemented to minimize negative impacts and encourage responsible development.

It was important that local stakeholders be involved in the RBB process. Therefore, the coalition established the Tri-County Stakeholder Advisory Group (SAG), which consists of 14 individuals from Brewster, Jeff Davis and Presidio counties.

This important group includes ranchers, conservation partners, community members and community leaders. Additionally, three industry partners provided guidance throughout the process. Over the last 2 ½ years, the SAG has met 14 times to provide valuable direction to the RBB coalition as they have worked to incorporate important data into the tool.

**The Stakeholder Advisory Group identified seven important values that represent why this region is unique:**

- **Ranching Heritage and Private Property Rights**
- **Vistas, Dark Skies, Remoteness and Quietness**
- **Sky Islands, Water, and Grasslands**
- **Wildlife and Migratory Corridors**
- **Tourism and Hunting**
- **Community, Safety, Quality of Life**
- **Culture, Music, and Art**

While no particular value was prioritized more than another, the SAG

identified the region's historic ranching heritage as the defining feature that supports the other important values of the Tri-County region. These vast, intact properties contribute immensely to the area's scenic vistas, dark skies, clean water, wildlife habitat and other unique traits.

Utilizing comparable spatial data, RBB coalition scientists mapped the values as recognized by the SAG. They also projected potential future energy development and compared where forecasted development would occur in areas with high cumulative values.

Although little oil and gas development is projected for the Tri-County area in the next 30 years, areas of the Trans-Pecos have potential for this type of development. Additionally, much of West Texas, within and beyond the Tri-County area, has high potential for wind or solar development. Many of these suitable areas also have high conservation value as well. While wind and solar development requires a lot of land per unit of energy produced, there is considerably more flexibility when it comes to siting new infrastructure.

Ultimately, this effort produced a conservation decision support tool. It maintains all relevant data and serves as a resource for those with an interest in potential energy development.

Based on the results of this process, the SAG formulated four recommendations:

- **Obtain stakeholder input to avoid the negative impacts of energy development.** This process engaged stakeholders, identified important resources, and provided a vision for balancing future development with cherished values. This RBB process could be replicated in other areas to ensure that the potential negative impacts of energy development are minimized.

- **Establish the Center for Land Stewardship and Community Engagement** at the Borderlands Research Institute at Sul Ross State University. This center would serve to provide technical resources and function as a conservation convener for community members, landowners and energy operators in Far West Texas. The center would also help ensure the long-term viability and functionality of the RBB initiative.
- **Support programs to keep large tracts of land intact, and preserve the values that they provide to all the citizens of the state.** Large, intact working lands are critical for maintaining most of the region's recognized values. Voluntary initiatives and incentives that minimize fragmentation, encourage conservation and enhance productivity would assist private landowners as they steward these values.
- **Restore land disturbed by energy development.** The land's natural resource values should be restored by energy operators to their original condition as rapidly as possible after disturbance. Doing so will reduce water pollution and wind erosion, restore habitat and improve Texas' ranching and hunting heritage as well as the land's environmental health.

The RBB coalition is now forming the Center for Land Stewardship and Community Engagement as well as planning future engagement activities in other Trans-Pecos regions.

For more information about the RBB coalition and access to the complete Tri-County report, visit [respectbigbend.org](http://respectbigbend.org).



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