



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
June 29, 2021

Media Contact:  
Carolyn Stephens  
Hill Country Conservancy  
512-328-2481  
carolyn@hillcountryconservancy.org

## SPICEWOOD RANCH EARNS CONSERVATION EASEMENT Hill Country Conservancy and Partners Announce Permanent Protection of Spicewood Ranch

AUSTIN, TEXAS – July 29, 2021 – Hill Country Conservancy (HCC), in conjunction with Chris Harte and son Will Harte of Spicewood Ranch, announced today a partnership agreement to permanently protect—through a conservation easement held by HCC—561 acres of environmentally sensitive land located within the Colorado River and Lake Travis watersheds. Chris and Will Harte plan to protect as much as possible of the approximately 550 additional contiguous acres that they own in Spicewood. Protection of this land will contribute to the region’s long-term water security, provide critical habitat for iconic Texas wildlife, and ensure that the ranch’s unspoiled farmland soils remain undeveloped and available for long-term agricultural use. The addition of these 561 acres brings HCC’s total conserved land to almost 14,000 acres.

Frank Davis, Chief Conservation Officer at Hill Country Conservancy said, “With over 95% of Texas’ land being privately owned, we are incredibly dependent on the efforts of stewards like the owners of Spicewood Ranch for their care of the region’s water resources, iconic Texas wildlife and our unique quality of life. The decades-long stewardship of Spicewood Ranch is now assured forever thanks to the commitment of Chris Harte and his son Will, to preserve the land in perpetuity. We are also grateful to the Damuth Foundation for the funding they contributed to make this possible.”

Spicewood Ranch is 45 minutes from downtown Austin, and just north of the burgeoning Hwy. 71 corridor. As Austin expands, this ecologically important region becomes increasingly subject to developmental pressure, making land conservation in this area imperative. The conservation values on Spicewood Ranch are of particular importance. The ranch boasts three miles of Alligator Creek and its tributaries which flow into Lake Travis—a primary drinking water source for the City of Austin and downstream communities. Other ephemeral streams, springs, and seeps found on the land contribute to the Barton Springs Edwards Aquifer, which provides drinking water to Central Texans. This plenteous water combines with the ranch’s variety of rich terrain to create an oasis of habitat for our abundant Texas wildlife. Many species of wildlife residing on the ranch have the Texas Parks and Wildlife designation “Species of Greatest Conservation Need’. Today’s newly established conservation easement will ensure the ranch’s plentiful water sources and fragile wildlife habitat will be here forever.

The land comprising Spicewood Ranch was not always as healthy as it is today. It was once heavily fragmented and had fallen victim to overgrazing and severe erosion. In 1972 the Harte family showed remarkable foresight by beginning to aggregate disparate parcels of land in the Spicewood area. Over the next decade their vision changed from traditional ranching to protecting and restoring native habitat on the ranch to protect the area's water quantity and quality, restore native habitat, and conduct ecological research. Harte's late wife, Kay Wagenknecht-Harte, initiated and led the effort to expand the ranch through more than 30 separate acquisitions over 47 years to its present size of more than 1,100 acres. She and restoration biologist David Mahler developed the strategy that Harte and his son Will continued after her death in 1997, using innovative stewardship practices to restore the previously mismanaged land back to its native form and function. As a measure of their accomplishment, Spicewood Ranch received the prestigious "Lone Star Land Steward Award" from Texas Parks and Wildlife in 2018, and in 2019 Travis Audubon Society awarded its Victor Emanuel Conservation Award to Harte for the restoration efforts. 595 plant species have been identified on the ranch, and 494 of them have been preserved in the ranch's on-site herbarium.

The partnership between Hill Country Conservancy and Spicewood Ranch will permanently protect the Harte family's careful land management and promote their stewardship goals to the benefit of the entire community.

"I've wanted to protect Spicewood Ranch for decades, but only in recent years have we made enough progress with our restoration efforts, and with buying enough of the 15 or so parcels of land in this 561-acre easement to make it possible to protect a reasonable tract of land," Harte said. "I sincerely appreciate the hard work of the Hill Country Conservancy, The Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Texas Parks and Wildlife's Texas Farm and Ranch Lands Conservation Program that have made this easement possible."

For more information about conservation easements and other tools being used to ensure long-term protection of private lands, visit: [www.HillCountryConservancy.org](http://www.HillCountryConservancy.org)

#### ABOUT HILL COUNTRY CONSERVANCY:

Hill Country Conservancy is a nonprofit land trust committed to preserving open spaces in the Texas Hill Country. Preserving vital natural resources through conservation, community collaboration, and engagement, Hill Country Conservancy works to sustain our region now and forever. For more information, visit [HillCountryConservancy.org](http://HillCountryConservancy.org).

###