

A Resolution

NO. _____

ADOPTION OF THE PROPOSED NATURAL AREA LAND MANAGEMENT POLICY

WHEREAS the City of Fort Worth is the 11th largest city and one of the fastest growing large cities in the United States, losing up to 2,500 acres of natural open space every year; and

WHEREAS the City of Fort Worth currently owns more than ten thousand (10,000) acres of unique natural areas or natural features that are managed by multiple departments; and

WHEREAS the City's Open Space program has acquired almost six hundred (600) acres in the past several years and an estimated five thousand (5,000) acres of City parklands (not including Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge acreage) have been identified as good candidates to be maintained as natural areas; and

WHEREAS the management and maintenance of natural areas is drastically different than routine maintenance of traditional recreational parkland; and

WHEREAS land management and maintenance methodologies have historically varied among the departments within the City, which can unintentionally undermine ecosystem integrity, biodiversity and reducing the benefits that ecosystems services can provide if not maintained properly; and

WHEREAS, this policy outlines a City-wide strategy that can protect City-owned natural resources by enhancing resilience of the properties and, in turn, deliver long-term environmental, social, and economic benefits to the Fort Worth community; and

WHEREAS, the policy emphasizes key priorities including ecosystem health, community safety, fiscal responsibility, and coordination across departments on how to manage natural areas; and

WHEREAS, the policy is intended as a high-level guide, with site-specific details to be developed through individual site management plans, operational manuals and maintenance standards by each department that maintains the natural area; and

WHEREAS, the processes outlined in the policy are recommended to be introduced in phases for each property and all processes are dependent on available funding and staffing; and

WHEREAS, the policy is applicable to all City-Owned properties that are prioritized and designated as natural area.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF FORT WORTH, TEXAS:

Section 1. The Fort Worth Natural Area Management Policy, attached as Exhibit A, is hereby adopted as a guide for future decisions related to the management of Fort Worth's

Natural Areas; and

Section 2. That this resolution shall take effect immediately from and after its passage in accordance with the provisions of the Charter of the City of Fort Worth, and is accordingly so resolved.

Adopted this _____ day of _____ 2026.

ATTEST:

By: _____

Jannette S. Goodall, City Secretary

City of Fort Worth Natural Area Land Management Policy – *FINAL DRAFT – April 14, 2026*

Executive Summary

The City of Fort Worth (City) owns and manages over ten thousand acres of Natural Areas across multiple departments. These areas have the potential to provide vital ecosystem services, recreational opportunities, and community benefits; however, management approaches have historically varied. This policy proposes the implementation of a consistent, unified strategy to managing Natural Areas.

For perspective, at the time of this Policy's adoption, approximate acreage of natural areas by department is currently as follows:

- Open Space Conservation Program – 600 acres
- Park & Recreation Department – estimated 5,000 – 7,000 acres, and closer to 10,000 acres if including the 3,669 Fort Worth Nature Center
- Water Department – 1,166 acres in Lake Worth area
- Additionally, several other City departments own and manage properties that may qualify as Natural Area or contain natural features. Staff are actively coordinating across departments to identify these sites and align on appropriate designation.

City-Wide Efforts

Multiple City efforts and initiatives currently recognize the importance of conserving and preserving Natural Areas, as reflected in their mission statements and strategic goals. These efforts include:

- **The Open Space Conservation Program** with its mission to conserve high-quality natural areas as the City grows to provide environmental benefits and recreational opportunities that support economic development and enhance the livability and desirability of Fort Worth;
- **Park and Recreation Department** through its own mission of enriching the lives of the citizens of Fort Worth through the stewardship of City resources and the responsive provision of quality recreational opportunities and community services as well as through the Departments *GREENprint Master Plan* and *Cultural & Natural Resource Committee*;
- **The City's Good Natured Green Space Initiative** with its strategic goals of (i) increasing access to nature for every Fort Worth resident and family; (ii) preserving the City's natural heritage and supporting quality of life as a part of balanced, long-term economic growth and vitality and (iii) being a steward to the health and security of the regional water supply while supporting City-wide flood control;

- **The City's Comprehensive Plan** which emphasizes a strategy for growth through the use of floodplains for agricultural and recreational use as well as the protection of mature woodlands, riparian corridors and other sensitive natural areas and incorporating protective woodland areas into new developments; and
- **The City's Floodplain Management Plan** which promotes natural area preservation as a protective measure for floodplain integrity.

Partnerships

Equally important is fostering strong partnerships with local and adjacent municipalities, federal, state and regional governments, academic agencies and private or non-profit partners to ensure coordinated planning, shared resources, and aligned management strategies.

Setting this example is a Memorandum of Understanding between the City and Tarrant Regional Water District that highlights alignment of efforts related to greenspace and land stewardship for watershed protection, water quality goals, flood mitigation efforts and expanding opportunities to connect with the natural environment.

Through collaboration efforts like this, the CFW can help create a connected, resilient landscape that maximizes environmental, economic, and community benefits for the entire region.

Conclusion

This policy is proposed to unify and carry forward the shared City-wide commitment to responsibly preserve Natural Areas by establishing a clear, cohesive vision to guide long-term stewardship and decision-making and establish a recommended citywide framework for the management of these City-owned Natural Areas to guide departments on how to maintain them effectively.

Document Outline

1. Section 1 – Introduction
2. Section 2 – Goals & Objectives
3. Section 3 – Management Framework & Strategies
4. Section 4 – Definitions

Section 1 – Introduction

Vision

To improve the quality of life for all residents and visitors through the balanced stewardship and management of Natural Areas owned by the City of Fort Worth (City).

Scope and Purpose

This policy is intended to provide Natural Area land management goals and guidance for all City-owned properties that have been identified and prioritized to be managed for the natural resources they provide. These can include all City-Owned (i) Open Space properties or (ii) designated natural areas or zones within larger properties that contain recognized natural features, such as riparian areas, natural channels, wildflower areas, wooded areas, wetlands, nesting sites, etc. Historically, CFW departments have applied various management and maintenance methodologies to natural areas and natural features, some of which can unintentionally undermine ecosystem integrity and biodiversity. These inconsistencies can significantly reduce the benefits that ecosystem services can provide, jeopardizing the overall goals of natural land management.

Land management planning and implementation practices for natural areas greatly differ from traditional park management. Traditional parkland maintenance activities tend to be routine and reactive, focusing on aesthetics and preserving existing conditions through actions like mowing, trail upkeep, and infrastructure repair. Effective natural land management emphasizes intentional, ongoing actions that guide ecosystem function and adjust over time to respond to ecological succession and cultural modification.

This policy does not pertain to private property within City limits or extraterritorial jurisdiction (ETJ). However, this policy may assist private property owners to better understand and manage their properties containing natural areas.

Guiding Principles

1. Balanced Stewardship – Manage Natural Areas to support ecological integrity while accommodating safe and appropriate public access
2. Adaptive Management – Use monitoring data to inform evolving strategies
3. Equitable Access to Nature – Promote meaningful, safe access to outdoor spaces.
4. Fiscal Responsibility – Align actions with available resources and long-term sustainability
5. Interdepartmental Coordination – Promote consistent practices across City departments

Section 2 - Goals & Objectives

The goals outlined below establish a citywide vision for Natural Area management that prioritizes community safety, resilient ecosystems, resident health and wellbeing, and responsible stewardship of resources. Together, these goals support the protection and enhancement of ecosystem services that sustain environmental function while delivering long-term social, economic, and public health benefits to the community.

1) Community Safety

Ensuring community safety in Natural Area areas is a critical component of responsible land management. For example, mowing and maintaining fuel breaks mitigate wildfire risk and can provide critical protection to residential areas. Additionally, by managing and reducing dense undergrowth, visibility and sightlines are improved, preventing hidden illegal and suspicious activity in dense brush and creating safer conditions for residents and visitors who visit. Natural Area may be closed periodically to protect visitors and natural resources.

2) Ecosystem Services

Ecosystem services are the direct and indirect benefits that ecosystems provide for people. When Natural Areas are managed properly it helps to prevent damage to roads, utilities, drainage systems, and minimizes expensive infrastructure repairs and lowers costs for taxpayers. Healthy ecosystems deliver these benefits naturally; when they are degraded, these services are diminished, with significant consequences for public health, private property, and overall quality of life. Protecting and supporting healthy ecosystems is therefore essential to the well-being of the environment, community and local economy.

Restoring a completely intact indigenous ecosystem is not a realistic goal. Natural Area with appropriate land management techniques will help to restore ecosystems as closely as possible to their natural condition.

Examples of ecosystem services include benefits listed below:

- Floodwater Mitigation/ Erosion and Sedimentation
- Water Filtration and Groundwater Recharge
- Air Filtration
- Carbon Sequestration
- Soil Health
- Urban Heat Island
- Habitat Preservation and Provision
- Pollination Services

3) Resident Health & Well-Being

Planning proper land management is integral to encourage meaningful access to the outdoors by creating and maintaining safe, welcoming ways for people to experience natural areas. Identifying opportunities for trail connections and investing in thoughtful trail system design ensures that residents and visitors can experience the outdoors safely and effectively. A safe and well-managed greenspace network supports regular physical activity, reduces stress, and fosters a deeper connection to nature, producing lasting benefits for community health and overall physical and mental well-being.

4) Responsibility of Resources

As the City plans for Natural Area land management, responsible stewardship of available funding and resources remains a central consideration. This goal is focused on prioritizing actions that deliver the greatest public, ecological, and safety benefits while maximizing efficiency and long-term value. By aligning management strategies with available staffing and resources, the City can thoughtfully care for natural spaces in a way that is sustainable, cost-effective, and responsive to community needs.

Section 3 - Management Framework & Strategies

As the City of Fort Worth continues to acquire and steward increasing amounts of Natural Area, a clear and coordinated management strategy becomes essential to ensure these resources are protected, accessible, and sustainably maintained over time.

It is the recommendation under this Policy that properties owned by the City and are designated as a Natural Areas are managed through an Integrated Resource Management Plan (IRMP) approach. An IRMP is a comprehensive, long-term framework for land management that integrates ecological, recreational, cultural, and operational considerations into a single, cohesive document that aligns conservation objectives with community needs for a particular property.

Integrated Resource Management Plan:

Creating an IRMP for each Natural Area will establish a shared vision and clear, measurable goals, assess existing conditions and constraints, and define priorities for conservation management, maintenance, and appropriate public access. The City recommends that the process, as outlined within this section, be followed by each department when developing the IRMP for a specific property.

By consolidating this information into a single guiding document, an IRMP establishes service priority tiers, enabling a clear determination of the Level of Service (“LOS”) for each property. Knowing the LOS for a property or asset is beneficial for establishing budgets,

directing staff and guiding the implementation of maintenance plans. It supports informed decision-making, efficient allocation of limited resources, and adaptive management practices that enhance resilience in the face of growth, climatic events, and evolving community expectations.

The development of an IRMP is supported by a series of coordinated actions, including baseline resource inventory, site assessments, management planning, site planning and continuous monitoring. These steps collectively build the technical foundation, shared understanding, and strategic direction necessary to produce a comprehensive and actionable plan.

1) Initial Review

Upon acquisition or designation, properties that have been identified and prioritized to be managed as Natural Area will undergo an initial review that looks at the general characteristics, location and site context of the property. During the initial review, immediate needs or concerns for public safety will be identified and next step operations that fall into the two maintenance categories below, will be documented.

a) Planned Basic Operations

These are activities that are budgeted and scheduled as part of routine maintenance and are implemented prior to developing land management plans. Planned basic operations may include mowing fuel breaks, limited basic mowing, and litter cleanup depending on the location of the site and necessary protections for life and property safety.

b) Unplanned or Emergency Operations

These are activities that were not budgeted or scheduled but are required to remediate threats to property and life safety. Emergency operations may include installing barriers to prevent vehicular access to a site or pedestrian access to a dangerous location, pruning or removing hazard trees, illegal dump cleanup, homeless encampment abatement, removal of debris from streams that can cause flooding, etc. These operations may be performed at any time at any site, regardless of whether a land management plan has been developed or implemented. Site Assessments

2) Benchmarking & Evaluations

After initial review, the property will be benchmarked and assessed to evaluate ecological habitat health and the presence and absence of natural resources. These assessments will help determine the LOS and appropriate management strategies and resources needed for the property. By grounding decisions in technical assessment, the City can prioritize actions, allocate resources efficiently, and ensure that natural areas continue to provide ecological, recreational, and community benefits over time.

a) Ecological Health Assessments

Ecological health assessments are evaluations of natural areas and natural features that will be performed regularly by city staff and trained partners and volunteers to benchmark and monitor the ecological health of a site over time. These assessments establish data that the city can use to prioritize sites for the development of land management plans, evaluate the efficacy of ongoing management strategies and ecosystem restoration projects, as well as apply for outside funding and support.

Examples of ecological assessments include vegetation surveys, stream health surveys, water quality surveys etc. All are very important to establish benchmarking points from which future monitoring will reference.

b) Site Natural Resource Assessments

This assessment evaluates existing physical conditions and determines whether, where, and to what extent recreational programming or amenities may be appropriate. Not all natural areas are suitable for recreational use. Sites whose primary functions include flood control, wildlife habitat, or ecosystem protection may not safely or sustainably accommodate public access.

This assessment will also identify sites that might require Federal, State or local permitting for natural resource or recreational improvements. For example, areas containing sensitive resources, such as wetlands or critical habitat, may be managed primarily for conservation to avoid adverse ecological impacts. These studies assess environmental constraints, natural and cultural resource sensitivity, programmatic opportunities and access, site capacity, and safety considerations to ensure that any proposed use is compatible with long-term resource protection.

Examples of amenities that may be considered include low-impact improvements such as trails, boardwalks, wildlife viewing areas, and interpretive signage. Amenities within natural areas shall be limited in footprint and intensity relative to programmed park facilities.

3) Land Management Plan

Using information gathered in the assessment phase, the next step under the IRMP is a structured planning approach. Understanding site conditions is important to aid in the identification of appropriate resource management and programming strategies and better align investments with long-term goals.

A Land Management Plan will be developed for each property designated as Natural Area that includes a comprehensive guide for management, operations and

monitoring needed to support habitat improvement or enhancement. These overarching Land Management Plans will establish management objectives for each site based on the condition of the site relative to its natural condition and improvements needed and will include Standard Operating Procedures and Management Manuals, Land Management Operational Planning Directives, Capital Improvement Plans for the property, Capital Asset Maintenance guidance, and identify Ecosystem Restoration Projects.

a) Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and Management Manuals

Land Management Plans will refer or can include one or several SOP or Management Manuals. Management Manuals and SOPs are citywide documents that apply across departments and list assets such as natural features and how to manage them. They outline roles and responsibilities, required methods, safety protocols, equipment standards, and documentation requirements to ensure that work is performed efficiently, safely, and in alignment with ecological objectives. By providing clear and repeatable guidance, SOPs and manuals support adaptive management, regulatory compliance, and long-term stewardship of natural resources.

Examples of management manuals can include applications such as mowing for fuel breaks, prescribed fire, understory mulching, wildlife management, stream, wetland and aquatic management.

b) Land Management Operations

The Land Management Plan will also include operational planning that will account for practical constraints that influence the scope and timing of implementation. Available funding, staffing capacity, equipment resources, seasonal conditions, site access, and challenging topography all affect the City's ability to carry out management activities on a comprehensive scale.

Steep slopes, sensitive habitats, limited utility access, or remote parcels may require specialized equipment or contracted services, increasing costs and scheduling complexity. As a result, management actions should be prioritized based on ecological need, public safety, regulatory requirements, and available resources, with clear phasing strategies that align implementation with realistic operational capacity and long-term funding commitment

c) Capital Improvement Plans

When a site can support recreational programming, a Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) for natural areas should be included in the larger Land Management Plan that will identify, prioritize, and schedule multi-year investments that support resource protection, appropriate public access, and long-term stewardship. Capital projects for natural areas will emphasize low-impact infrastructure, such as, trails, access points, boardwalks, restoration-related improvements, and

signage. Capital investments shall be aligned with site conditions, management objectives, and available funding.

d) Capital Asset Maintenance Planning

A Capital Asset Maintenance Plan shall guide the ongoing maintenance, repair, and replacement of existing natural area infrastructure to ensure public safety, asset longevity, and consistency with resource protection goals. The plan shall emphasize preventative maintenance, lifecycle planning, and the efficient allocation of resources for assets such as trails, boardwalks, bridges, signage, and access features.

e) Ecosystem Restoration Projects

Ecosystem restoration projects can address sites requiring substantial ecological intervention beyond routine management. These projects shall be included in the Capital Improvement Plan and shall establish clear restoration objectives and performance outcomes. Restoration efforts may be phased and can include invasive species removal, native vegetation establishment, streambank stabilization, and other actions necessary to restore ecological function.

4) Continued Monitoring

Ecosystems and ecological habitats are dynamic and continually changing in response to natural processes, climate conditions, and human influence. A regularly scheduled monitoring program is the last piece to the IRMP that is necessary to track ecological conditions over time, evaluate the effectiveness of management and restoration actions, and identify emerging issues.

Ongoing monitoring can include regularly updating the assessments performed during the initial Ecological Health Assessments, monitoring invasive removal impacts, fire effects, wildlife population trends, routine biological assessments and water quality surveys. This supports adaptive management by providing the data needed to adjust strategies, prioritize future actions, and ensure long-term ecosystem health and resilience.

A periodic reporting process is proposed to summarize monitoring results, document management and restoration activities, and assess progress toward established goals. Reports are intended to provide decision-makers with a clear, consistent basis for evaluating outcomes, identifying trends, and informing future planning and investment priorities.

Opportunities for public input are also proposed as part of the monitoring and reporting process. Public feedback may be used to inform adaptive management decisions, improve transparency, and ensure that natural area management reflects community values, user experience, and stewardship priorities.

The City recognizes that staffing, funding and operations are contingent upon budget capacity and implementation of natural land management will be planned, phased and prioritized according to available resources.

It is vital to understand that this policy is intended to serve as a guiding document that outlines an overarching framework for the City's approach to natural lands management. Details for site specific operations, implementation and applications will be addressed within individual management plans and maintenance manuals.

Section 4 - Definitions

Examples of operations and management activities provided under definitions are for context purposes and are not prescriptive. Detailed operations and management activities will be provided in Management Manuals and SOPs.

Ecological Restoration: Reestablishing the ecological integrity of a site to better support ecosystem services and biodiversity.

Examples of restoration operations include the removal of invasive species, reestablishing native species, prescribed fire, restoring eroded stream channels, wetland construction or enhancements, habitat connections, etc.

Ecosystem Integrity: Degree to which an ecosystem can maintain biodiversity, ecological functions, and ecosystem services when compared to its natural condition.

Ecosystem Services: The direct and indirect benefits that humans derive from natural ecosystems (FEMA definition), including flood control, air and water filtration, urban heat island mitigation, improving mental health, providing access for recreation, and more.

Greenspace: Encompasses all parks, open spaces, urban forests, landscape medians and parkways, cemeteries, outdoor sports and recreation facilities, trails, nature preserves, floodplains, riparian areas, prairies and woodlands.

Integrated Resource Management Plan (IRMP): Strategic framework that integrates comprehensive planning, management, and operations for natural areas and natural resources.

Level of Service (LOS): LOS in land and asset management defines the quality, safety, and capacity of infrastructure – in this case natural areas or features – delivered to stakeholders. It justifies funding by balancing service levels with costs. LOS is divided into tiers/levels to

help balance and justify resourcing based on each individual site conditions and use, not just size or acreage.

Maintenance: Basic operations performed on a site without the expectation that they will result in improvements in ecosystem integrity or even prevent further degradation.

Examples of these operations include reducing threats to neighboring properties, such as mowing fuel breaks, or threats to public safety like removing hazard trees.

Management: Active interventions that improve the ecosystem integrity of a natural area or natural feature. These include the range of skilled operations performed as part of ecological restoration.

Natural Area: Properties that are designated and managed to best support the ecosystem services that they provide. Most properties owned by the Open Space Conservation Program are natural areas, as well as designated natural spaces within parks. These may also include properties owned by other departments but managed by PARD as natural areas, typically through a memorandum of understanding (MOU).

Natural Condition: The condition of resources that would occur in the absence of human dominance over the landscape (National Park Service definition).

Natural Features: There are natural features located in CFW parks and other properties, such as streams, wetlands, lakes, prairies, woodlands, and forests, that serve important ecosystem functions.

Natural Resources: Encompasses all natural features, processes, and systems, including:

- physical resources such as water, air, soils, topographic features, geologic features, and paleontological resources.
- physical processes such as weather, erosion, cave formation, and wildfires.
- biological resources such as native plants, animals, and communities.
- biological processes such as photosynthesis, succession, and ecosystem evolution; and
- highly valued associated characteristics such as scenic views.

(adapted from National Park Service definition)

Open Space: Properties owned by the Open Space Conservation Program. Reference [Chapter 36](#) of the City of Fort Worth Code of Ordinances for the full legal definition of Open Space.