

KPTA Response to the 2011 Texas Drought

2011 saw Texas in the worst drought in over 120 years. In all the 20 years that I have been on the KPTA board I have never seen so many trees killed by a natural event at one time. In 1999 we removed around 300 trees due to the 1998 drought and in 2009 another 300 due to Hurricane Ike. The tree count from the 2011 drought is currently over 600 trees and we are still marking and removing trees.



What is the process for identifying dead trees? The KPTA trail system has over 13 miles of trails and over 158 acres. This is a narrow corridor in many places as lots backup to the trails. The board has emergency procedures setup to assess damage due to a natural catastrophe. Each director has an assigned section of trails to complete and reports a summary of damages and maintenance needed. These reports are consolidated to determine the scope of work and as the basis for bids. For removing dead trees the contractor walks each section of the trails with a director and each tree is numbered for removal. It is most efficient to do a section of trails at a time to maximize the manpower and equipment needed.

What types of trees are dying? In our forests we have a predominance of Pines and Oaks. During times of stress the large pine trees will begin to suffer and will be the first to die. The oaks are more resilient and many will make it through the initial drought but will be weakened and will die in a second wave of dead trees. The majority of trees we are removing are pines with some very large oaks on the eastern side of our trails by the East End Park.

What is the process of removing the trees? After marking the trees our contractor comes onto the trails to begin removal. The large pines are dropped and as much of the tree as possible is put through a chipper and the chips are blown back into the woods. If the truck is too large for the chipper and it is in a narrow corridor it will be hauled out otherwise it will be pushed back into the woods to rot naturally and add shelter on the forest floor.



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Oak trees can have a different sort of life after they have died. Due to the hardness of their wood it is not always necessary to take them down to the ground for removal. Where it is safe we have elected to remove the upper branches and leave the trunk of the tree standing thus becoming a snag. Snags are extremely valuable to the forest ecosystem providing sites for nests of woodpeckers, bluebirds, owls.

What is the risk of the equipment on the trails? There is always a risk to the hardscape of our trails when you have large equipment on them. It is an unfortunate result and can be minimized but not avoided. This year after the driest summer we had one of the wettest springs on record. This created less than optimum conditions on our trails and the board was reluctant to begin tree removal until the ground had sufficiently dried up. However, the safety of our trails is more important than trails damage and it was determined to begin removal and deal with the broken trail system latter. To minimize the cost of removal we have always taken responsibility for repair of any trail damage rather than have the contractor increase his price per tree to include the potential for trail repair. We are down to the last two sections of trails and in total the trails has had very little damage done due to the diligence of our contractor.



What is the estimated cost to KPTA? The board currently estimates that we will spend approximately \$200K to remove the trees that we have identified.

Does KPTA have the money for this expense? Yes we do have the money. The reason we do goes back to 1992 when the residents first took over the KPTA board. In 1992 we had a total of 35K in a reserve account. Understanding the amount of infrastructure and the cost to maintain it was the driving factor in creating the first KPTA trails map. Creating the map forced some realities on the board that maintaining the 13 miles of trails, the 30+ benches, 1000ft of concrete fence, over 1000ft of bridges and any catastrophic event required careful money management of our yearly expenses to fund a reserve account for future maintenance. With almost back to back \$200K events (Hurricane Ike in 2009, Texas drought 2011) our reserves are depleting faster than we can accumulate. Additionally, the City of Houston has imposed an \$11K annual Drainage Fee on our trails based on the calculation of our hardscape. With this financial impact we have increased our annual fees to \$100 this year. This is up \$15 from \$85 last year. \$5 of that fee is to pay the City of Houston's drainage fee, \$10 is to help maintain our reserve fund.

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Once the trees are gone, will you replant? It is the intention of the board to replant but not until we can be assured of a normal rainfall in summer. The trails are not supplemented with any watering and even our connectors are impacted where residents have not watered them. We will be reviewing planting options and will communicate it in a future message.

Do you have any final thoughts? The KPTA is a natural area that adds a great deal of beauty to our neighborhood. Taking care of nature in an urban environment is a challenge. Homeowners that live along the greenbelt tend to want to create an extension of their yard which is not in keeping with the philosophy of the trails. As a natural area it is not to be mowed more than we have contracted. To preserve the forest we must retain as much native vegetation as possible, especially the understory layer. Two-thirds of all wildlife species in the forest rely on the lower two-thirds of the forest vegetation. When we replant, we will replant with native plants that provide food and shelter for wildlife. The beauty of the forest is in the collective environment that creates the varied habitat for wildlife. We are visitors to this habitat and as such we should minimize our intrusion to this environment. With the loss of so many trees the forest has pockets of sun that were densely forested. It will be an opportunity for annual and perennial plants to fill the forest floor with color until the trees once again fill the sky above.

		
Rabbit on trail	Butterfly on lantana at connector	Magnolia bloom by Lake Houston

I would ask that residents view our preserve as visitors with an eye for the beauty and the serenity that only comes from walks in nature. Please help us preserve our nature reserve.