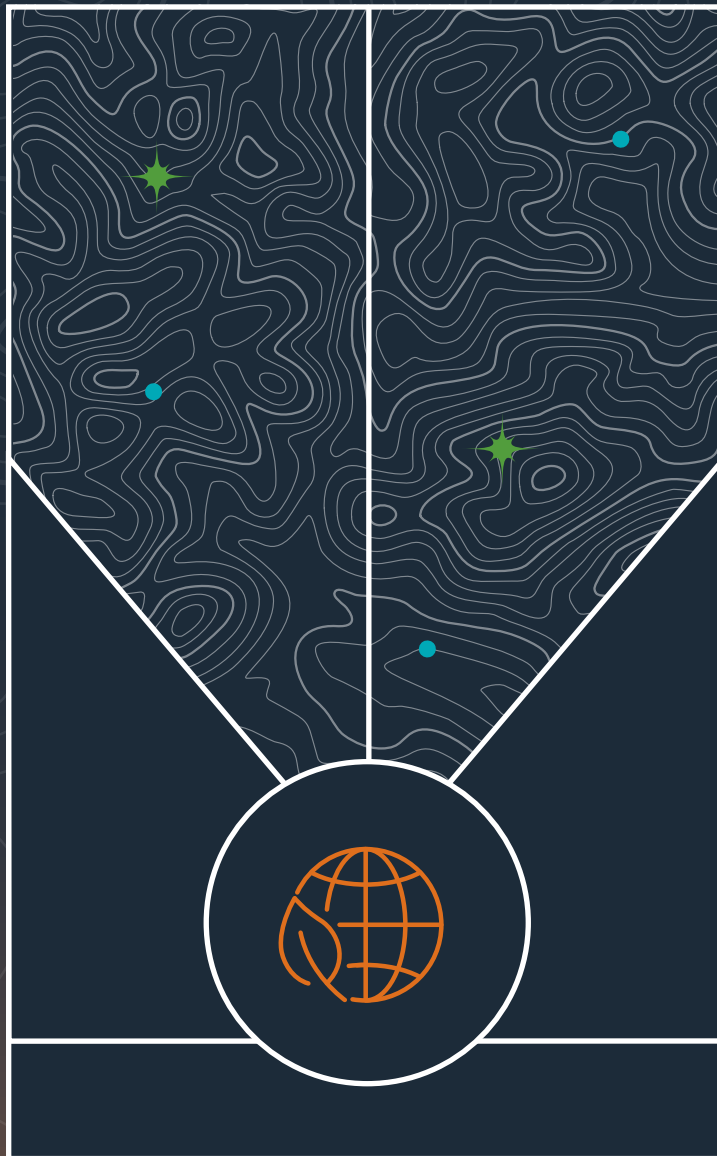


PLANET TEXAS 2050

FISCAL YEAR 2026 ANNUAL REPORT



TEXAS

The University of Texas at Austin
Office of the Vice President for Research

PLANET TEXAS 2050

FISCAL YEAR 2026 ANNUAL REPORT

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A RESILIENT FUTURE FOR TEXAS IS OUR GRAND CHALLENGE.



On July 4, 2025, the Guadalupe River rose 26 feet in 45 minutes, tearing through the Texas Hill Country.

Texas is the fastest-growing state in the nation, and that growth is colliding with a changing climate in ways that put communities, infrastructure and ecosystems under simultaneous strain. By midcentury, the state is expected to add millions more residents, increasing demand for water, energy, housing, transportation and land. Those pressures will unfold alongside more severe heat, more destructive floods, more frequent drought and more unpredictable wildfire.

These challenges are interconnected in ways that no single discipline can fully see, let alone address. Launched in 2018 as the first Bridging Barriers research grand challenge, Planet Texas 2050 was built on that premise. The grand challenge connects teams of scientists, engineers, architects, planners, public health researchers, archaeologists, artists, educators and humanists who work alongside communities, cities and agencies to shape research and put findings to use. The goal is not only to generate knowledge but also to make that knowledge useful: translating research into tools, strategies and decisions that help Texans respond to current conditions and prepare for what is coming.

In Fiscal Year 2026, that work took on new urgency after the deadly flooding in the Texas Hill Country on July 4, 2025, which exposed the need for stronger connections among research, warning systems, public agencies and community decision-making. Planet Texas 2050 researchers contributed expertise to emerging regional efforts, helped launch new research partnerships and redirected existing projects toward urgent questions about hazard communication, infrastructure and preparedness. The response reflected years of investment in interdisciplinary teams, community partnerships and decision-support tools that can be mobilized when Texas communities face acute risk.

PLANET TEXAS 2050 HIGHLIGHTS IN NUMBERS

Expanding Networks

98 active
researchers

34 UT departments
& disciplines

15 schools &
colleges

32 external
partners

9 events hosted
over the past year

Engaging Students

51 undergraduate &
graduate student
researchers



Scholarly Output & Publicity

14 scholarly works published
over the past year
(acknowledging Planet Texas 2050
support)

20 news articles over
the past year

Building Capacity

\$35.5M
awarded in external
funding to date

PROGRAM ACHIEVEMENTS

In FY26, Planet Texas 2050 carried its mission forward through interdisciplinary research, cross-sector collaboration and public engagement across Texas and beyond. The grand challenge drew on the expertise of nearly 100 faculty, researchers and students from 34 academic departments and units across the University, working alongside more than 20 community, government and institutional partners.

Throughout the year, Planet Texas 2050 deepened its work on flood resilience, hazard communication, urban heat, ecological change and community-centered design. The grand challenge's response to urgent events reflected the value of sustained investments in partnerships, data infrastructure and public engagement, while its ongoing projects continued to strengthen the research base for a more resilient Texas.

Research

Planet Texas 2050's research portfolio includes long-running flagship projects, cross-team collaborations, municipal partnerships, postdoctoral fellowships and arts and humanities initiatives. In FY26, that network continued to connect foundational research with practical applications, producing tools, frameworks and findings that can inform decisions at the community, municipal and state levels.

FLOOD RESILIENCE

The July 2025 Central Texas floods made Texas's vulnerability to flooding unmistakably clear. In the Hill Country, the Guadalupe River rose 26 feet in 45 minutes, causing devastating loss and raising urgent questions about infrastructure, warning systems, communication and decision-making in rapidly evolving flood events. The disaster accelerated work already underway across several Planet Texas 2050 teams and catalyzed new research partnerships focused on future flood risk.

At the programmatic level, Planet Texas 2050 co-hosted the third annual Texas Flood Organizing Group gathering with the Texas Water Development Board, bringing together researchers, agency partners and practitioners to coordinate flood resilience efforts statewide. The grand challenge also became connected to Schreiner University's emerging Hazard Risk and Readiness Institute in Kerrville through **David Maidment** (professor emeritus, Maseeh Department of Civil, Architectural and Environmental Engineering, Cockrell School of Engineering), a Networks for Hazard Preparedness and Response researcher whose legislative testimony after the July 4 disaster helped highlight the need for regional research capacity in the Hill Country. Planet Texas 2050 co-chair **Patrick Bixler** (LBJ School of Public Affairs) reoriented work supported by a National Science Foundation (NSF) planning grant to help establish the Institute.

Meanwhile, **Keri Stephens** (Communication Studies, Moody College of Communication), **Kasey Faust** (Maseeh Department of Civil, Architectural and Environmental Engineering, Cockrell School of Engineering) and **Suzanne Pierce** (Texas Advanced Computing Center) partnered with Schreiner psychologist **Karolyn Andrews** through a new NSF RAPID grant. Awarded roughly 24 hours after submission, the grant supports interdisciplinary research into why so many people in the path of the July 4 floods may not have received, understood or acted on warnings, and what systemic changes could reduce that gap in future events.

The team is conducting interviews with residents who evacuated, residents who stayed, officials involved in response and visitors who were less familiar with the terrain. Findings are being processed through Pierce's DYNAMO system at TACC, building what the team calls a dynamic sensemaking framework: a way to map how people make decisions as a disaster unfolds. "Computing lets us hold dozens of people's experiences in view at once and trace the connections between the river, the roads and the warnings," Pierce said. "But the method is built so the human story stays in charge and the analysis serves people's understanding. It doesn't replace their control over the choice."

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Flood response project co-PI Kasey Faust delivers a guest lecture at TACC's Decision Support Office Hands-on Summer Training Institute in May. Researchers and agency representatives learned reusable tools and workflows for integrating human stories with data and models. The course was led by co-PI Suzanne Pierce with Decision Support Office researcher Will Mobley and funded in part by the Texas Water Development Board. Photo courtesy of TACC.

The Networks for Hazard Preparedness and Response project team, led by Bixler and **Paola Passalacqua** (now at ETH Zurich), prepared the Texas Flood Social Vulnerability Index for adoption by the Texas Water Development Board and provided direct guidance to regional flood planning groups on its use in the current state flood plan cycle. Partnering with Schreiner University, the team also led the NSF-funded Texas WEATHER planning grant, extending its “model to maps to action” framework into the Hill Country in response to the July 4 events. The team also released **PyGeoFlood**, a Python package that builds on earlier GeoFlood research to support near-real-time terrain analysis for fluvial, pluvial and coastal flood inundation mapping.

In Southeast Texas, the Resilient and Regenerative Cities project team, led by **Katherine Lieberknecht** (School of Architecture) and **Fernanda Leite** (Maseeh Department of Civil, Architectural and Environmental Engineering, Cockrell School of Engineering), continued work through the Southeast Texas Urban Integrated Field Laboratory (SETx-UIFL), sustaining community co-design partnerships in Beaumont and Port Arthur. The team developed community-informed flood mitigation and floodplain protection scenarios and visualizations in collaboration with Oak Ridge and Los Alamos National Laboratories, conservation partners and SETx-UIFL collaborators. The project team’s research contributed to a financial commitment by the City of Port Arthur for Pleasure Island Park redesign, showing how research informed implementation.

Altogether, these efforts moved Planet Texas 2050’s flood work beyond modeling and vulnerability assessment into regional planning, agency adoption and post-disaster learning.

“Computing lets us hold dozens of people’s experiences in view at once and trace the connections between the river, the roads and the warnings. But the method is built so the human story stays in charge and the analysis serves people’s understanding. It doesn’t replace their control over the choice.”

SUZANNE PIERCE, TEXAS ADVANCED COMPUTING CENTER

HEAT, POWER AND URBAN RISK

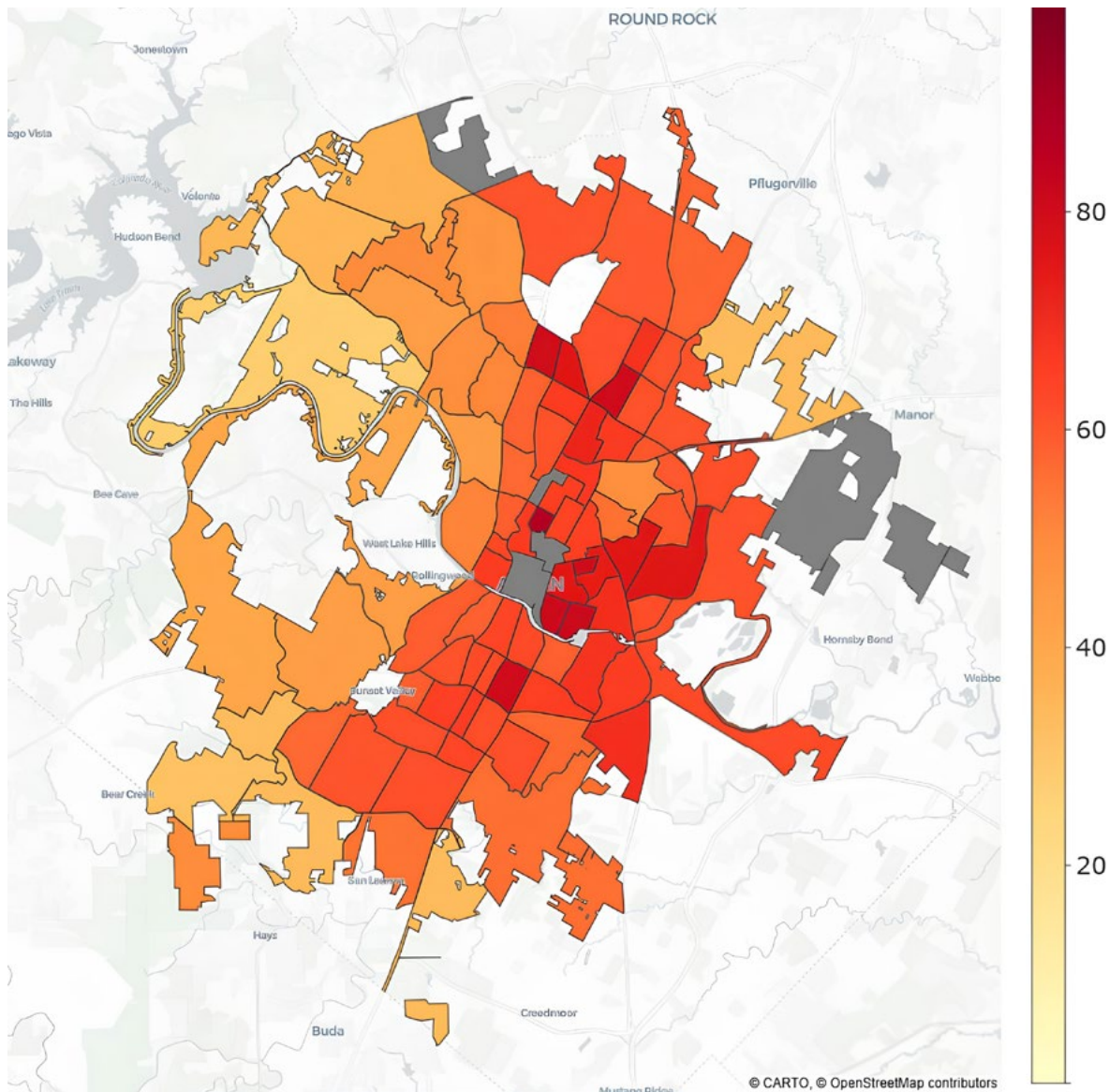
The UT-City of Austin Climate CoLab grew out of Planet Texas 2050's work to connect University research with municipal decision-making and remains closely tied to the grand challenge through faculty leadership, student engagement and shared resilience priorities. In FY26, the CoLab marked a year of expanded research activity and growing recognition as a model for helping cities translate climate data into planning, policy and public health decisions. Other cities and agencies have expressed interest in the CoLab's approach, which has also drawn recognition from the World Meteorological Organization.

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Among the year's most visible CoLab outputs was a study examining indoor heat risk during a simultaneous heat wave and power outage. The study, conducted by a five-person team including [Dev Niyogi](#) (Earth and Planetary Sciences, Jackson School of Geosciences) and [Calvin Lin](#) (Computer Science, College of Natural Sciences) was published in [Building and Environment](#). It found that most Austin homes would pose dangerous or potentially fatal conditions for older residents during a simultaneous heat wave and power outage, giving planners and public health officials clearer evidence for targeted interventions. A companion effort mapped Austin's hottest neighborhoods, street by street, providing granular data that can help guide cooling strategies, tree canopy planning and emergency preparedness. "This allows us to know what's actually happening within the neighborhoods, and who's most vulnerable, without having to go door-to-door," said **Marc Coudert**, climate resilience and adaptation manager for Austin Climate Action & Resilience.

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The CoLab's heat-modeling work is also beginning to extend beyond Austin. Building on earlier work connected to heat-risk planning for the 2024 Paris Olympics, CoLab researchers are developing a digital-twin approach that could help planners assess heat exposure, test interventions and support public health decisions for the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics.



This map shows the current risk of death to Austin’s elderly population if they were to stay inside their home during a heat wave and simultaneous power outage. The median heat risk for each neighborhood is displayed as the value.

The CoLab also supported applied research on wildfire mitigation, urban tree and forest health, building decarbonization, construction-and-demolition waste and scenario planning under uncertainty. Student-led and community-engaged research expanded the CoLab’s applied learning opportunities, including “thermal witnessing” walks where participants documented lived experiences of extreme heat and bilingual engagement designed to make community input more accessible to Spanish-speaking residents.

AI AND DECISION SUPPORT

Planet Texas 2050's AI-enabled Model Integration for Complex Decision Making (AIM) project team continued to expand the grand challenge's cyberinfrastructure and decision-support capabilities in FY26. The work is designed to help researchers and public-sector partners combine models, maps, sensor data and community knowledge so they can test scenarios before decisions have to be made under pressure.

The team refined the DataX Portal, completed end-to-end data integration testing across the Planet Texas 2050 decision-support infrastructure and automated terrain data workflows from drone collection through annotation and integration. A new Open Drone Map service linked to the DataX Portal launched in spring 2026. AIM also contributed expertise to an NSF "Navigating the New Arctic" project through AI and geospatial analysis, helping develop digital twin workflows tied to planned extensometer deployments in Bethel, Alaska, in partnership with city leadership.

The team's anchor publication for the year, "[A Science Gateway Approach to Decision Support](#)," documented the full Planet Texas 2050 suite of computational services and core decision support infrastructure. **Suzanne Pierce** (Texas Advanced Computing Center) and colleagues also co-chaired a decision sciences session at the Trillion Parameter Conference and delivered a practitioner-focused workshop at the Hawai'i International Conference on System Sciences, sharing Planet Texas 2050's decision-support approach with researchers and practitioners working at the intersection of AI, modeling and public-sector decision-making.

In the Rio Grande Valley, AIM researchers continued using AI-enabled models to connect storm surge, flood pathways and infectious disease risk, bringing together natural hazard modeling and public health questions that are often studied separately. The work helps local partners explore how water moves through communities, where standing water may create health risks and how technical forecasts can be paired with community knowledge. By linking environmental, infrastructural and health data through the Planet Texas 2050 decision-support platform, the team is helping communities and agencies better understand how cascading risks can unfold across sectors and where interventions may be most effective.

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Planet Texas 2050-supported geospatial health-risk research also received national recognition through work connected to the Texas Advanced Computing Center. A UT Rio Grande Valley team led by **Debanjan Sarkar** won the Outstanding Spatial Analysis award at the 2026 Esri User Conference for a **map** that combines species records, remote sensing imagery and modeling to identify potential vector-borne disease risk hotspots across Texas under present-day and projected climate conditions.

COMMUNITY-LEVEL ACTION

The Frontline Community Partnerships project team built on years of relationship-driven work in Pharr and the Rio Grande Valley, earning two high-profile national recognitions and deepening long-term community partnerships in FY26.

The team's work in the Las Milpas neighborhood of Pharr, in South Texas, was selected for Monument Lab's Re:Generation initiative, the first Texas-based project funded by the national organization. The award supports "Voices of Las Milpas," a community-led commemoration project centering the stories, struggles and environmental visions of Las Milpas residents. The team also received an SOM Foundation Research Prize, recognizing the quality and community impact of its design work.

On the ground, the team continued to work toward improvements to Jones Box Park in Pharr through televised and municipal presentations, ongoing coordination with the City of Pharr and council engagement to secure seed funding. **Maggie Hansen** (School of Architecture) taught an advanced master's studio focused on the park redesign, connecting studio education directly to community-defined priorities. "It's such an honor to be the first project from Texas and to engage with other project leaders sharing stories from across the U.S. so we can learn from one another while honoring each community's priorities," Hansen said.

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"It's such an honor to be the first project from Texas and to engage with other project leaders sharing stories from across the U.S. so we can learn from one another while honoring each community's priorities."

**MAGGIE HANSEN,
SCHOOL OF
ARCHITECTURE**



Frontline Community Partnerships project graduate students lead a community-driven design workshop with Pharr Eco Alliance onsite in Pharr, Texas. The goal was to gather input from Pharr youth to develop the Jones Box Park proposal.

The team's work also inspired a long-term philanthropic commitment from **Janice Hagerman**, a former graduate research assistant who worked with Hansen, **Miriam Solis** (School of Architecture) and **Carmen Valdez** (UT Health San Antonio) while completing dual master's degrees in community and regional planning and public affairs at UT. Hagerman first encountered the team through Solis' practicum and later worked with Hansen on research related to green schoolyards and climate resilience, including more than 40 hours of interviews with advocates, school planners, teachers and others involved in projects across Texas. She also supported grant development with the team, gaining a close view of the labor required to sustain community-engaged research.

For Hagerman, the experience changed how she understood the relationship between university research, climate resilience and frontline communities. In Pharr and the Rio Grande Valley, she saw how participatory mapping and youth engagement could help residents articulate daily challenges, from street lighting and crosswalks to heat, flooding and air quality. It also showed her how fragile that work can be when it depends on short-term or uncertain funding. Her gift is structured to provide continuity over time, including support for graduate and doctoral students, travel to project sites and scholarly publications, while giving the researchers and their community partners flexibility to adapt as needs change. As Hagerman described it, the goal is to support "the people who support the work," recognizing that the value of the work lies not only in a final design or policy outcome but in the trust, training and relationships built along the way.

Solis also led a year-long community and regional planning practicum on connectivity and green corridors, helping students examine how safer routes, shade, public space and ecological infrastructure can strengthen everyday resilience in Pharr. A related photovoice project with Voces Unidas, a nonprofit organization that works with Latino communities in Colorado, invited residents to document neighborhood environmental conditions through photography and storytelling, culminating in a community exhibition. The team also delivered environmental data collection workshops for youth participants through ARISE Adelante — a Rio Grande Valley organization that promotes education, leadership and civic participation among women, children and youth — and helped develop Refining Futures, an arts-based project focused on environmental futures in Port Arthur.

ECOLOGY IN TRANSITION

Graduate student **Brian Stokes** (Integrative Biology, College of Natural Sciences), working under Resilience in Species and Ecosystems (RISE) project co-leader **Tim Keitt** (Integrative Biology, College of Natural Sciences), identified the first known natural hybrid between a blue jay and a green jay. The bird, spotted in a suburb of San Antonio, appears to be a product of climate-driven range shifts that brought the historically separated species into contact for the first time. The discovery, which offered a visible example of ecological change underway in Texas, generated national and international attention, with coverage in NPR, Science News, WBUR Boston and other outlets.

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A rare hybrid bird identified in a suburb of San Antonio (center; credit: Brian Stokes) is the result of mating between a male blue jay (left; credit: Travis Maher/Cornell Lab of Ornithology/Macaulay Library) and a female green jay (right; credit: Dan O'Brien/Cornell Lab of Ornithology/Macaulay Library).

Beyond the discovery of the “Grue Jay,” as it quickly became known, RISE expanded its network of autonomous environmental sensors across the Texas Field Station Network, deploying integrated bioacoustics and environmental sensors at McDonald Observatory, Stengl Lost Pines, the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, the Hill Country Field Station and the White Family Outdoor Learning Center. Six additional sensors were deployed on private land between Dallas and Austin. The team is now planning coordinated spring bird migration data collection across Field Station Network sites as a proof of concept for a long-term, cross-station autonomous sensing network.

RISE also launched a remote sensing and AI-based tree canopy analysis project with the City of Austin and the UT-City CoLab, contributing to an Austin Tree Boundary model that will support urban forestry planning.

In other research supported by Planet Texas 2050, [Melissa Kemp](#), along with former graduate student **David Ledesma** and undergraduate research assistant **Kyle Moxley** (all from Integrative Biology, College of Natural Sciences), examined how mole salamanders responded to past periods of environmental change in Central Texas, offering clues for conservation in a warming, drying climate. Published in [Quaternary Research](#), the study used fossil evidence from Hall’s Cave and other regional sites to show how *Ambystoma* salamanders shifted across the landscape and eventually disappeared from the Edwards Plateau as conditions became hotter and drier. The findings highlight the importance of protecting the streams, ponds and other wet habitats these species need to survive.

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CULTURAL HERITAGE IN A CHANGING CLIMATE

The Stories of Ancient Resilience (SOAR) team, co-led by [Adam Rabinowitz](#) (Classics, College of Liberal Arts), carried forward a broad portfolio of research and creative production in FY26, centering on cultural heritage, archaeology, climate risk and immersive visualization.

SOAR’s Cultural Heritage Risk Map is designed to help researchers and public agencies understand where archaeological and cultural sites may face heightened exposure to flooding, wildfire and other climate-related hazards. In FY26, undergraduate participants in UT’s Home2Texas program contributed more than 400 culturally significant sites to the map, expanding its coverage and connecting the project to student learning.

The team also continued building the map's technical foundation by developing H3 risk-scoring workflows, which use a standardized hexagonal grid to compare risk across different places and datasets, and by exploring integration with PyGeoFlood to strengthen flood-risk analysis. Working with SOAR researchers, postdoctoral fellow **Oscar Ovanger** (Jackson School of Geosciences) helped refine the probabilistic modeling behind the map. The team also proposed methods for obscuring sensitive site locations to the Texas Historical Commission for approval, an important step for safeguarding those locations while making the tool useful for planning and preservation.

In other work, the team continued to develop virtual reality reconstructions of Spring Lake and the Gault Site across multiple historical periods in collaboration with Monash University. In Belize, SOAR researchers conducted a field season with faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, and alumni. The work included excavation, LiDAR-guided field checking and lake coring. In the laboratory, the team produced DNA sequencing results from Roman remains at Histria in Romania, and soil radiocarbon analysis at Stengl Lost Pines, east of Austin. The team also launched the UT Archaeology Collective, supported by matching funds from four College of Liberal Arts departments.

Cross-Team and Creative Collaborations

Planet Texas 2050 supports integrative efforts that connect researchers, artists, educators and communities across disciplinary lines. In FY26, these collaborations included the debut of postdoctoral fellows whose work spanned multiple flagship projects; an arts-integrated climate education partnership with Austin public schools that reached an international audience; a two-day film festival dedicated to climate storytelling; and ongoing scholarship and creative work by the Planet Texas 2050 + Humanities Institute Faculty Fellows.

ARTISTS IN DIALOGUE WITH RESEARCHERS

In partnership with the Visual Arts Center, Planet Texas 2050 supported the development of **“How to Grow the Cowpea: Survival Strategies from the U.S. South,”** an exhibition that brings artists into conversation with Planet Texas 2050 researchers working on flooding, paleoclimate, bird migration and other areas of climate resilience. The exhibition will open in September 2026. During FY26, artists, curators and researchers developed five new site-specific commissions through a series of conversations.

POSTDOCTORAL FELLOWS CONNECT TEAMS AND THEMES

Planet Texas 2050's postdoctoral fellows help connect projects that might otherwise remain in separate disciplinary lanes. In FY26, **Khristián Méndez Aguirre** (School of Architecture) and **Oscar Ovanger** (Jackson School of Geosciences) brought distinct methods to the grand challenge: one grounded in performance, storytelling and community-engaged research, the other in statistical modeling and environmental prediction.

Méndez Aguirre, a dramaturge and scholar originally from Guatemala City, brought a theater-maker's lens to the human experience of climate change, working across Planet Texas 2050's research teams to explore how performance can bridge the distance between scientific data and lived experience. His work includes "The Serpents Fly at Sundown," a production that uses puppetry to gather and retell stories from disaster survivors. At the 2026 Planet Texas 2050 Symposium, Méndez Aguirre moderated a panel — "Pivoting Towards Clarity: A Conversation on Researching with Communities" — that brought together researchers and community partners to reflect on the practice of collaborative, community-engaged research.

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One of Khristián Méndez Aguirre's productions, "The Serpents Fly at Sundown," utilizes puppetry to gather stories from people who have survived natural disasters. Photo credit: Jacob Eaker

After completing his doctorate in statistics and geostatistics at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, where he focused on subsurface reservoir modeling, Ovanger joined Planet Texas 2050 as a postdoctoral fellow. At Planet Texas 2050, Ovanger applied those same data-driven methods to a different set of questions, developing probabilistic environmental prediction tools that integrate atmospheric, ecological and community-based data across the RISE and SOAR projects and the Climate CoLab. The fellowship allowed Ovanger to apply statistical modeling methods from petroleum research to climate resilience questions in Texas.

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Oscar Ovanger (left) moderates a panel at the 2026 Planet Texas 2050 Symposium, with his three postdoctoral advisers: Professors Adam Rabinowitz, Dev Niyogi and Tim Keitt.

DRAMA-BASED CLIMATE LEARNING

Planet Texas 2050 continued to examine how arts-integrated pedagogy can support climate literacy and resilience building through its partnership with Drama for Schools, a program that uses theater, movement, role-playing and collaborative inquiry to help students explore complex ideas through embodied and creative learning rather than through lecture or text alone. In the climate resilience curriculum, that approach gives students a way to connect scientific concepts with lived experience, community conditions and imagined futures.

Co-led by **Katie Dawson** and **Lara Dossett** (both Theatre and Dance, College of Fine Arts), along with **Stephanie Cawthon** (Educational Psychology, College of Education), Drama for Schools delivered its second Climate Resilience with Youth Student/Teacher Learning Community to the full seventh-grade cohort at the Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders. The program culminated in a student-led arts festival and showed measurable gains in climate literacy and student self-efficacy.



Left to right: co-authors Stephanie Cawthon, Katie Dawson and Lara Dossett at the annual Faculty Authors Reception, in January 2026. Their book, “Drama for Schools and Beyond: Transformative Learning Through the Arts,” won the 2026 Distinguished Book Award from the American Alliance for Theatre and Education.

Fiscal Year 2026 also marked a milestone for Drama for Schools. Reflecting on two decades of research, the team published “Drama for Schools and Beyond: Transformative Learning Through the Arts,” which won the 2026 Distinguished Book Award from the American Alliance for Theatre and Education. “We write the books we need,” Dawson said. “This one was about pausing to look back at 20 years of impact — locally, globally, and as a research contribution.”

The team held a symposium in May in honor of the initiative’s 20th anniversary, which brought together university faculty, teaching artists and K-12 educators from Texas and abroad, with participants from Australia, Poland, Bosnia, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Dawson traveled to Australia and Europe to speak and conduct workshops, extending the project’s international reach further.

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In May, teachers, students, teaching artists, academics and administrators from across the globe gathered at UT for the Drama for Schools Symposium.

CLIMATE STORYTELLING THROUGH FILM

In the spring, Planet Texas 2050 and the Department of Theatre and Dance co-hosted the Seeds of Change Film Festival, a two-day gathering of filmmakers, researchers, artists and community members exploring climate resilience through film. Organized around two screening blocks — “Land” and “Water” — the festival showcased more than a dozen short films before closing with a screening of “Mālama Mākua,” an award-winning documentary co-written and produced by **Laurel Mei-Singh** (Geography and the Environment, College of Liberal Arts), one of the inaugural Planet Texas 2050 + Humanities Institute Faculty Learning Community fellows.

Kate Freer (Theatre and Dance, College of Fine Arts) helped organize the Seeds of Change festival and also screened her own film, “ARISE: Pharr,” created with youth participants and community members from Planet Texas 2050’s work in the Rio Grande Valley. “For me, it is an affirmation that there’s interest, there’s work, there’s artists and scientists and collaborators across many disciplines that are using film as a medium to investigate and communicate and create work about this really important topic,” Freer said.

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“For me, it is an affirmation that there’s interest, there’s work, there’s artists and scientists and collaborators across many disciplines that are using film as a medium to investigate and communicate and create work about this really important topic”

**KATE FREER,
COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS**



Kate Freer, who helped organize the Seeds of Change festival, introduces the films.

THE WAY OF WATER

Planet Texas 2050 also co-sponsored “The Way of Water,” a multiyear series of large-scale community performances by Forklift Danceworks that brought together public workers, scientists, artists and community members to make Austin’s watershed systems visible. Across two projects, each spotlighting a different river in Austin, the work reached 14,000 audience members, engaged 1,500 City of Austin staff as collaborators and brought 142 public employees and community members onto the stage as performers. Audience surveys found that 80% of respondents reported a greater understanding of watershed systems. The projects illustrate a central premise of Planet Texas 2050’s arts collaborations: artists are not simply communicators of research but partners in creating public understanding, civic engagement and new ways of seeing environmental systems.

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PLANET TEXAS 2050 + HUMANITIES INSTITUTE FACULTY LEARNING COMMUNITY

The Planet Texas 2050 + Humanities Institute Faculty Learning Community was created to seed collaborations that center arts, design and humanities methods within climate resilience research. In FY26, fellows used performance, oral history, design research, public scholarship and creative production to examine how people experience environmental change and how communities build forms of care, memory and stewardship.

Leah Cox (Theatre and Dance, College of Fine Arts) used Planet Texas 2050 support to present “Group Therapy,” an interactive, evening-length dance-theater work, at the 2026 Fusebox Festival. The performance invites audience members to consider their relationships with one another and with the natural world, generating sound recordings and written responses that Cox will analyze for themes related to connection, care and environmental meaning.



Leah Cox (sitting, center of circle) used Planet Texas 2050 support to present “Group Therapy,” an interactive, evening-length dance-theater work, at the 2026 Fusebox Festival.

Cat Ploehn (School of Design and Creative Technologies, College of Fine Arts), working with research fellow **Ceren Ozgen**, developed “Visualizing the Food Forest” in partnership with Festival Beach Food Forest and the Keitt Lab. The project uses data collection and visualization to bring to light the intertwined ecological and community resilience of the food forest. One strand of the work measures microclimate conditions, including temperature, humidity, heat index, sound and air quality, to explore how the food forest may temper extreme heat compared with surrounding parkland and cityscape. A second strand collects stories of gifts received in the food forest, documenting tangible and intangible forms of exchange such as food, belonging and connection to land.

During FY26, Ploehn and Ozgen held three microclimate workshops at Festival Beach Food Forest, including sessions with architecture and design students and a public workshop. The project produced a collection of microclimate data, a replicable workshop method and design research outputs accepted for presentation at the 2026 Design Research Society International Conference and the 2026 Transition Design Conference. Ploehn also completed an artist residency with Soft Data and Common Wares at the University of Washington, where she prototyped an offline-first, hyperlocal system for collecting and visualizing “gift” data and exhibited the work at the University of Washington Greenhouse.

Rosemary Candelario (Theatre and Dance, College of Fine Arts) performed her site-adaptive dance work “aqueous” at the Marine Science Institute in Port Aransas as part of the pilot Maymester course Coastal Challenges and Change, co-created with Marine Science Institute faculty. The course weaves marine science, oral history and embodied movement together, and in post-performance feedback, participants reported a greater sense of calm and environmental connection. Earlier in FY26, “aqueous” was also featured in the Texas Science Festival’s art-science programming, where Planet Texas 2050 helped host a public performance at Waller Creek that invited audiences to reflect on the ecology and cultural significance of urban water.

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The Gigacities Collective — **Randolph Lewis** (American Studies, College of Liberal Arts), **Craig Campbell** (Anthropology, College of Liberal Arts) and **Florian Grundmüller** (University of Göttingen) — exhibited at Ars Electronica 2025 in Linz, Germany, the world’s largest festival for art, technology and society, reaching an estimated 15,000 visitors. Their film “Launch Site: SpaceX on the Gulf Coast” screened at the Seeds of Change Film Festival and at the University of Gdańsk in Poland, and a second issue of their magazine *Elon* is in preparation.

Other fellows pursued work at the intersection of environmental history, community memory and public scholarship. **Megan Poole** (Rhetoric and Writing, College of Liberal Arts) led the Boggy Creek Oral History project in partnership with East Austin community organization People Organized in Defense of Earth and Her Resources, gathering oral histories with longtime residents about the environmental history of Boggy Creek. Two websites — one featuring contemporary oral histories and another drawing on historic materials from the Austin History Center — are in development, with the Austin Public Library signed on as a long-term archival partner.

Donnie Johnson Sackey (Rhetoric and Writing, College of Liberal Arts) led a national analysis of Consumer Confidence Reports, the annual drinking water quality documents required under the Safe Drinking Water Act, examining how their design and accessibility shape public engagement with water governance.

The “Errant Elements” chapbook series, edited by **Marina Peterson** (Anthropology, College of Liberal Arts) and **Gretchen Bakke** (Humboldt University, Berlin), uses the periodic table as a framework for exploring how elemental materials shape environmental life, from the minerals and chemicals embedded in infrastructure to the substances that circulate through air, water, soil and bodies. Bringing together academics, writers, artists and composers, the series treats each element as an entry point into questions of climate change, extraction, toxicity, repair and human dependence on the material world. Two new issues were published in FY26, with a third sent to press and a fourth in copy editing, and the project is building toward formal launch events in 2026.

Brenda Boonabaana (Geography and the Environment, College of Liberal Arts), whose work examines how refugee and refugee-host farming communities in Uganda navigate the combined pressures of climate change and displacement, prepared for the first phase of fieldwork by virtually training a Uganda-based research team for preliminary data collection in summer 2026. The project also received support from the College of Liberal Arts’ Undergraduate Research Apprenticeship Program, which will fund three UT undergraduate research apprentices to contribute to the work in fall 2026.

2026 Symposium: Resilience Research in Action

Planet Texas 2050’s annual symposium was a two-day gathering in March that brought together researchers, artists, students, community leaders and practitioners to share findings and explore how Texans are responding to climate challenges. The program connected climate science, technology, art and community knowledge to applied questions involving flooding, infrastructure, ecological change, storytelling and care.

Student lightning talks showcased research from across the grand challenge including climate-driven avian hybridization in Texas; paleoenvironmental shifts in West Texas; devised theater for environmental expression with youth; and mobility planning for Las Milpas, a colonia in Pharr, Texas. Panels and demonstrations showcased the grand challenge’s decision-support infrastructure, including the “Science Gateway Toolbox,” and explored how climate research can inform conservation, disaster preparedness and community resilience.

The symposium also reflected Planet Texas 2050's commitment to community partnership and artistic practice. Sessions brought together researchers and community leaders working throughout Texas and beyond and closed with a hands-on workshop about artistic and ecological pedagogy involving food, ecology and embodied learning. The event served as a campuswide platform for sharing results, strengthening partnerships and identifying new directions for resilience research.



Kelly Haragan (right) participated in the “Activating Artistic Practice and Storytelling” panel discussion at the 2026 symposium. Planet Texas 2050’s Rosemary Candelario joined her on the panel.

PLANET TEXAS 2050 HEADLINES

EXTERNAL NEWS FEATURES AND MENTIONS

- 9/25/2025 **Meet the ‘grue jay,’ a rare hybrid songbird**
Science News
- 10/23/2025 **Meet the ‘grue jay,’ a new bird found in Texas**
NPR
- 10/24/2025 **Meet the ‘grue jay,’ a natural hybrid between the blue jay and green jay**
WBUR Boston
- 12/5/2025 **City Continues Working Toward Climate Resilience Goals**
Austin Chronicle
- 2/10/2026 **When Blackouts Occur During Heat Waves, Austin Homes Pose Major Risk**
City of Austin
- 2/10/2026 **UT study finds 85% of Austin homes pose deadly risk to older people during extreme heat, power outages**
KXAN
- 6/16/2026 **Researchers are bridging the gap between lived experience and data-driven policy to empower Southeast Texas residents**
TAMU School of Architecture News

UT AUSTIN NEWS COVERAGE

- 9/18/2025 **So What Should We Call This Thing – a Grue Jay?**
College of Natural Sciences
- 9/27/2025 **Texas Science Festival bridges research and community**
Texas Connect
- 10/15/2025 **UT researchers use AI models to predict storm surges, infectious disease spread**
The Daily Texan
- 10/20/2025 **Vulnerable Salamanders, Key to Healthy Ecosystems, a Focus in Two Recent Studies** College of Natural Sciences
- 11/5/2025 **From Research to Results: UT-City of Austin Partnership Delivers Regional Innovation**
UT News
- 11/18/2025 **Sheryl Luzzadder-Beach Receives 2025 Rip Rapp Archaeological Geology Award**
College of Liberal Arts
- 12/13/2025 **Jackson School Professors Lead UNESCO Chair in Open Data, AI, Water, and Cities**
Jackson School of Geosciences
- 3/8/2026 **Austin unveils climate resilience plan in collaboration with UT**
The Daily Texan

UT OVPR COMMUNICATIONS

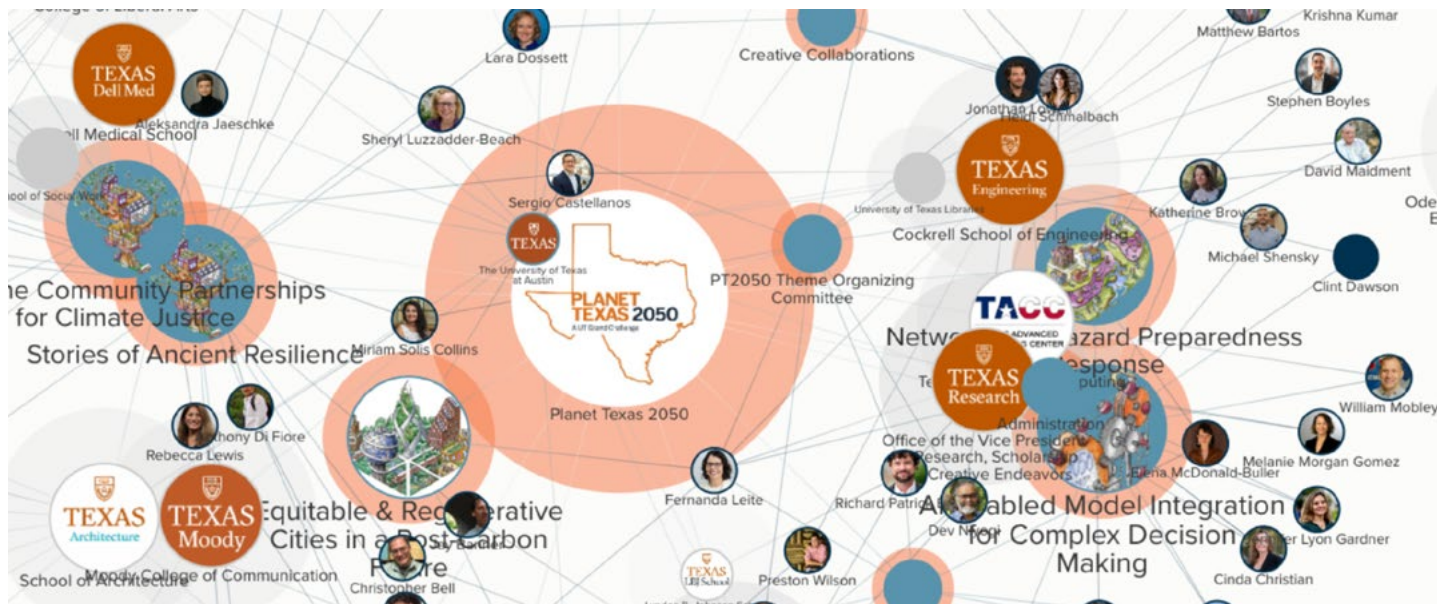
- 1/12/2026 **Climate Takes Center Stage**
- 2/4/2026 **From Local Advocacy to National Spotlight**
- 6/11/2026 **Southern Exposure: A Norwegian statistician finds new applications for his research in climate resilience at Planet Texas 2050**
- 7/1/2026 **For Those the Warnings Missed**
- 7/14/2026 **Sowing Seeds of Change**

CREATING CONNECTIONS

Collaboration is the engine that powers Planet Texas 2050. The grand challenge's research network now spans almost 100 researchers from 34 departments and disciplines across The University of Texas at Austin, connecting faculty and students from the Jackson School of Geosciences and the Cockrell School of Engineering to the College of Fine Arts, the College of Liberal Arts, the LBJ School of Public Affairs and beyond. What sets Planet Texas 2050 apart is not only the number of disciplines represented but also the degree to which they work together, sharing data, co-authoring papers, teaching across fields and building tools that no single discipline could create alone.

Those connections extend beyond campus. In FY26, Planet Texas 2050 collaborated with more than 20 external partners, including municipal agencies in Austin, Port Arthur and Pharr; state bodies including the Texas Water Development Board and Texas Parks and Wildlife; nonprofits, community organizations, national laboratories and institutions ranging from the Museum of South Texas History and Schreiner University in Texas to Monash University in Australia. These partners do not simply receive research outputs; they help shape the questions, test the tools and carry findings into policy and practice.

Explore Planet Texas 2050's growing web of people and projects using our [interactive network map](#). Search by name, unit or project, or click any node to trace its connections across the grand challenge.



Planet Texas 2050 Partners

- Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders
- Austin ISD
- ARISE Adelante
- AT&T
- Austin Common
- Austin Public Health
- Austin Watershed Protection
- City of Austin Office of Resilience and Climate Action
- City of Pharr
- Community Coalition for Health
- Community Resilience Trust
- Creative Policy
- EcoRise
- Forklift Danceworks
- GAVA (Go Austin/Vamos Austin)
- Giddyup Studios
- Indigenous Cultures Institute
- Keep Pharr Beautiful
- La Unión del Pueblo Entero (LUPE)
- Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center
- Microsoft
- Museum of South Texas History
- Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD
- Resilient Future Studio
- Schreiner University
- Texas Children in Nature Network
- Texas Nature Conservancy
- Texas Parks and Wildlife
- Texas Target Communities
- Texas Water Development Board
- Travis County
- Urban Wildlife Information Network

FUNDED GRANTS

To date, Planet Texas 2050 researchers have secured nearly \$35.5 million in external funding through grants, gifts and awards that directly support the grand challenge's mission. External awards from the most recent fiscal year are listed below.

Monument Lab

Voices of Las Milpas

\$100,000

Maggie Hansen, School of Architecture

SOM Foundation

Visioning Eco-Connectivity with Youth in the Rio Grande Valley

\$100,000

Maggie Hansen and Miriam Solis, School of Architecture

***† National Aeronautics and Space Administration**

VITAL: Virtual Institute for Temporal and Additive Learning

\$234,113

Suzanne Pierce, Texas Advanced Computing Center

***National Science Foundation**

Beyond the Warning: How Infrastructure, Communication, and Decision-Making Intersect During Rapid-Onset Flooding

\$200,000

Suzanne Pierce, Texas Advanced Computing Center; Kasey Faust, Cockrell School of Engineering; Keri Stephens, Moody College of Communication

City of Austin

University of Texas-City of Austin Climate CoLab

\$300,000

Dev Niyogi, Jackson School of Geosciences

†UK Research and Innovation, Natural Environment Research Council

CANARY: Coupling AI & Niche Assessment for Risk discovery

\$408,000

Tim Keitt, College of Natural Sciences

* Awarded in FY25 but not previously reported

† Indicates subaward; only UT's portion reflected

PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

Planet Texas 2050 researchers advanced knowledge through successful multidisciplinary collaborations, leading to a wide range of peer-reviewed publications and conference presentations. The list below highlights the breadth of publications from the past fiscal year; most are available online.

- Azizi, K., & Bixler, R. P. (2026). **Flood exposure and household green stormwater infrastructure adoption**. *Environmental Research Communications*, 8(2), 025016.
- Azizi, K., Wang, Y., Enriquez, O., Passalacqua, P., Niyogi, D., & Bixler, R. P. (2025). **Integrating perspectives: Multi-sectoral insights into U.S. Gulf Coast flood governance**. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 127, 105662.
- *Blitch, M., Marentes, C., Andelkovic, J., Butterbaugh, N., Koszarek, A., Aguilar, E., Carlson, N., Lieberknecht, K., & Stephens, K. K. (2026). **“Saber que no Estaba Sola; Knowing I was not Alone”: Communities Organizing Through Technology for Resilience**. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 0(0).
- *Brelsford, C., Coon, E. T., Wang, M., Rosenheim, N., Brake, N., Haselbach, L., & Passalacqua, P. (2026). **Multi-objective urban observational strategies: A risk-based framework for expanding flood sensor networks**. *Water Resources Research*, 62(1), e2025WR041135.
- Butcher, D., Pierce, S.A., Mobley, W., Lacau, A., Faust, K. (2026, March 18-21). **Community-guided climate adaptation: Integrating indigenous priorities in arctic infrastructure planning** [Conference session]. Construction Research Congress 2026, San Antonio, Texas.
- Cheng, C. S., Hou, T. C., & Leite, F. (2025, May 11-14). **Generating disaster damage assessment datasets with physics-based simulations and sensing data** [Paper presentation]. ASCE International Conference on Computing in Civil Engineering, New Orleans, Louisiana.
- Dawson, K., Link, B., Cawthon, S., & Dossett, L. (2025). **Drama for Schools and Beyond: Transformative Learning Through the Arts**. Chicago: Intellect.
- *Land, S. R., Baxter, J., Mickel, A., Bixler, P., Farrell, S., Johnson, S., Carr, W., Robertson T., Brush, L., & Marchetta, J. (2026). **Relating collaborative capacity to social-ecological outcomes in the United States—bridging academic and practitioner perspectives**. *Society & Natural Resources*, 39(2), 341-363.
- *Lanza, K., Allison, B., Chen, B., Wilson, P. S., Hunt, E. T., Burford, K. G., Zhabg, Y., Ganzar, L. A., & Keitt, T. H. (2025). **Ambient environmental exposures while cycling on a vegetated trail versus the road**. *Urban Climate*, 61, 102429.
- Luo, L., Cheng, C. S., Mobley, W., Novoselac, A., Lieberknecht, K., & Leite, F. (2025). **Scenario generation for built environment decision support under uncertainty: case studies of airflow modeling and climate-resilient infrastructure system design**. *Journal of Computing in Civil Engineering*, 39(4), 05025002.
- Luo, L., Cheng, C. S., Mobley, W., Lieberknecht, K., Kim, J., & Leite, F. (2026). **Optimizing fluvial flood mitigation strategies: A multi-objective approach for cost-effective and socially-aware infrastructure feasibility analysis**. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 133, 106004.

- Ma, Y., Wang, R., Chen, Y., Liu, X., Lieberknecht, K., & Osman, K. K. (2025). **Diverging point-source pathogen pollution patterns across urban–rural gradient and pollutant sources in Texas, United States.** *Environmental Science & Technology Letters*, 13(1), 109-116.
- *Murphy, S., Wang, M., Cheng, C. S., Passalacqua, P., & Leite, F. (2025). **Land-use analysis using infrastructure representations and high-resolution flood inundation mapping techniques.** *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 123, 105518.
- *Murphy, S., Cheng, C.-S., Kim, J., Leite, F. (2025, July 28-31). **Enhancing resilience to coastal hazards: An analysis of resources, tools, and processes to improve land use decision-making in the United States** [Conference session]. CSCE Construction Specialty Conference, Montréal, Canada.
- *Murphy, S., Cheng, C. S., Kim, J., Faust, K. M., & Leite, F. (2026). **Exploring stages of resilience maturity as communities confront climate risks.** *Cleaner Production Letters*, 10, 100141.
- Pierce, S. A., Pearson, L., Osorio, M., Tijerina, S., Trueheart, V., Faust, K., & Mobley, W. (2026). **A science gateway approach to decision support.** *SN Computer Science*, 7(3), 256.
- Pierce, S.A., Mobley, W., Kredelev, V., Fletcher, L., & Osorio, M. (2025, October 28-30). **Connecting science and stories: A human-AI method for multi-modal knowledge capture that integrates sensors, community narratives, and computational decision models** [Conference session]. Science Gateways. Green Bay, WI.
- Pierce, S.A. (2025, July 25-31). **Satisficing at scale: How AI connects community knowledge with scientific models for actionable solutions.** In F. Alexander (Chair), *AI in decision sciences* [Symposium]. Trillion Parameter Conference, San Jose, CA.
- *Rosenheim, N., Mezei, L., Preisser, M., Bixler, P., Brelsford, C., Passalacqua, P., & Meyer, M. (2026). **Where social vulnerability indices diverge: Navigating the decision cascade for local site selection.** *Natural Hazards*, 122(11), 476.
- *Stillwell, A. S., Banner, J. L., Tremaine, D. M., Bixler, R. P., Faust, K. M., Ganguly, A. R., Gray, S., Jordan, R., Meerow, S., Nielsen-Gammon, J., Niyogi, D., Olabisi, L. S., Wilson, B., Sellner, M., Portney, K., Decaro, D. A., Pierce, S., & Young, M. (2026). **Envisioning sustainable urban areas through integrative physical systems and governance frameworks.** *Environmental Research: Infrastructure and Sustainability*, 6(2), 023002.
- *Solis, M., Contreras, S., Arroyo, E. L., & Rodriguez, G. (2026). **Building codes and environmental justice: A scoping literature review for resilience.** Available at SSRN 6187165.
- Stephens, K.K., Liu, X., Carlson, N., Aguilar, E.D., Pierce, S.A. (2026). Culture-first communication to mitigate flood dangers. *Journal of Health Communication*. 10.1080/10810730.2025.2587111. (Accepted for Publication)
- Stokes, B. R., & Keitt, T. H. (2025). **An intergeneric hybrid between historically isolated temperate and tropical Jays following recent range expansion.** *Ecology and Evolution*, 15(9), e72148.
- Valdez, C. R., Leal, R., Chatham, A., Meltzer, G., Arroyo, E., Flores, L., & Solis, M. (2026). **Extreme heat and physical and mental health: A qualitative study with low-income women in South Texas.** *Health & Place*, 97, 103609.

*Indicates publication that did not explicitly acknowledge Planet Texas 2050, but authors have confirmed as an output from Planet Texas 2050 research, data or collaboration

PLANET TEXAS 2050 TEAM

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Flagship Project Co-Leads

Planet Texas 2050's flagship projects are led by faculty and researchers from across The University of Texas at Austin, with expertise spanning engineering, planning, public health, ecology, archaeology, computing, the arts and the humanities. These co-leads help shape the grand challenge's research priorities, support interdisciplinary collaboration and connect project teams with community, government and institutional partners.

AI-ENABLED MODEL INTEGRATION FOR COMPLEX DECISION MAKING

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