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Editorial: Texas songbird's loyalty should be rewarded.

Breeding grounds of the golden-cheeked warbler should be protected from harm.

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Fort Hood has a large population of golden cheeked warblers. Despite the military training that takes place here, these rare birds thrive because of land and wildlife management practices.

The golden-cheeked warbler is a small migratory songbird distinguished by a flame of brilliant gold flowing from its beak back across its cheeks. It is a ferociously loyal Texan, unwilling to breed and nest anywhere except in the dense groves of old-growth ashe juniper and oak trees that blanket the canyons and washes of the **Hill Country**. It is the only bird whose breeding grounds are limited to Texas. And that's the problem. As development pushed against its habitat, the warbler found it increasingly difficult to find breeding room and its numbers declined perilously. In 1990, the **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service** (FWS) took the controversial step of declaring it an endangered species. Many landowners responded by bulldozing the juniper stands on their properties to avoid the restrictions dictated by the law. Their motto: "Shoot, shovel and shut up."

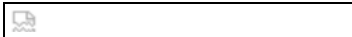
Now, 25 years later, the landscape is dramatically different, both topographically and politically. The rare and beautiful warbler has survived, bird enthusiasts come from around the world to observe it, and innovative collaborations have developed among many of the stakeholders in the region to protect the warbler while mitigating the impact on landowners. FWS along with local governments and

nonprofits such as the [Audubon Society](#) have purchased habitat acreage to be set aside for preserves, thus freeing up other properties for development. Early on, [Fort Hood Army Base's](#) 66,000 acres of habitat was home to the largest known population of warblers in the state. When keeping it safe for the birds began to interfere with tank training, Fort Hood, with the help of the [Texas Watershed Management Foundation](#), Texas A&M and Environmental Defense Fund, launched a plan to pay local ranchers to swap warbler-friendly acreage on their properties for the military's protected lands. The ranchers, many of whom had been antagonistic to the listing, are now stewards of the bird's habitat, and Fort Hood's tanks can blast away. All in all, a successful enterprise.

Yet, for reasons hard to ascertain, three foundations have petitioned Fish and Wildlife to remove the golden-cheeked warbler from the endangered species list, a move that would open large swaths of Central Texas to development. The official petitioners include Texans for Positive Economic Policy, a group led by former Texas Comptroller [Susan Combs](#); the [Texas Public Policy Foundation](#), whose chairman of the board is [Wendy Lee Gramm](#), who served in the [Office of Management and Budget](#) as head of the [Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs](#) during President Reagan's second term; and the Reason Foundation, which is headquartered in Los Angeles and has as a trustee [David H. Koch](#), who along with his brother [Charles G. Koch](#), does business in Kansas. [George P. Bush](#), Texas land commissioner, has voiced strong support for their efforts.

No one, including the petitioners, disputes the fact that without adequate breeding grounds in Central Texas, the warbler's survival would be threatened. The disagreement is over how likely that is. The petitioners say there is and has always been adequate habitat and the bird is thriving. Conservationists would prefer to make sure, and for 25 years, local stakeholders have managed to work toward that end with comity and effectiveness. Why step in now and undo the progress that has been made? The Fish and Wildlife Service should deny the petition. Loyalty should always be rewarded.

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