Collaborative Processes in Landscape Planning: Private Landowner Leadership in Conservation

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I am presenting on subjects that have been evolving over many years in the social and political debate over the conservation of our Nation's natural resources. My remarks will not be any means earth shattering, but they will challenge each of you to think beyond your comfort zone in terms of how we may think about processes in planning for conservation of our lands and natural resources on private lands. In order to understand some opportunities for innovation in collaborative stewardship on private lands, I offer some perspectives and observations of what we have all come to accept as the way that we as citizens express our concerns for the environment on both public and private lands.

I do hope that what I share today is not taken as the complete story or, even worse, a cookbook for working together in improving our relationships with one another and with our environment. I can assure you that there is no such thing. We are, after all, certain that human values differ and that the subject of conservation of our environment is not by any means as simple as assembling the science and/or the facts and moving forward with the implementation of a management plan on either public or on private lands.

Whether our professional focus is biology, botany, ranching, mining, recreation and tourism, ecology, oil and gas production, economics, finance, education, law, health care or retail, we have varying degrees of awareness of the relationships human beings

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have with our environment. We all, however, use what we have learned to assess the approach we take on issues or management options as they relate to our environment.

At the most basic level, we all actively manage our environment whether we realize it or not. Perhaps the one management tool that we all share, and do not always recognize in the midst of contentious environmental issues, is that of learning from our daily relationship with our environment and from one another.

Whether we share the same values, or live in rural, suburban or urban America, we all do have certain knowledge of our surroundings in order to manage our relationship with our environment. Whether we adjust the thermostat in our homes when the temperature drops; whether we eat beef or vegetables; whether we ride in a vehicle or on a bicycle; whether we take a deep breath of oxygen in Maine or Wyoming, we are human beings that choose and demand the life supporting goods and services from our environment.

These human choices and demands are the basis for the need to responsibly manage a perpetual relationship with our environment. If we all have a part in the responsibility to manage our relationship with our environment, and we each have every valid basis to have different values and perspectives, why is it so challenging to understand the ways in which we can work together to accomplish our mutual goals?

I have organized my presentation to allow us to explore some of the opportunities to working together to conserve and manage our relationship with the environment. I share these thoughts as an active and willing student and learner. I ask that each of you ponder what I offer and suggest additional ways we can work together to learn with and from one another to improve the ways we manage our relationship with our environment

and, therefore, mutually improve our ability to sustain that relationship on both public and private lands.

Opportunity One: Commit to Learning Together and From One Another

When was the last time one of us heard that a new movie was just out, went to see it and left thinking about all the ways the movie reminded us of an older movie or a combination or several? Or, when dealing with an environmental issue, we shaped our opinion on a political or legal process point because of an experience we had or discussion we had with several people that held similar views as ours?

When we look at environmental issues we all face, we naturally focus on what we know about the most. Whether a policy-making process point regarding federal lands, a species we have extensive knowledge about, or a lifelong vocation in raising cattle, we are each experts in our own right. We are usually quite sure of ourselves as it relates to the subject of which we have first hand knowledge.

If we get together with others and discuss an environmental issue, we usually move easily into the environmentalist camp or the pro-multiple use faction. We even categorize rather nicely the easterner from the westerner, the liberal arts trained from the land grant college graduate, the activist from the academic, the clueless from the ones that we think have a clue, the rural blue counties from the urban red counties, and we categorize and categorize until what we have created is a map of opinions or stereotypes.

From that point forward we have created some incredible barriers to working together to improve the issue or condition in the environmental arena. We are easily polarized like sports teams or political candidates and immediately move into a contentious, competitive strategic campaign mode to win our point or our case.

That contention has as it's basis a win-loose-draw legacy of what has become a "do what we want or we will sue" steering mechanism in environmental policy. This form of political hostage taking on the behalf of both sides of the issue has resulted in a highly distrustful and even further polarized condition in our society regarding environmental issues and policy.

The tragic fact is that I am not too sure any of us end up achieving the improvements we want in conservation. Worse yet, we end up counting our successes as to the strategic battles won and missing out on the knowledge we might have gained or improvements in our environment that we sincerely were concerned about in the first place. We end up feeling like we can only trust those that think like us and that whomever won the latest battle simply won unfairly or because we were simply out maneuvered politically.

Opportunity One: Choosing to Learn Together and From One Another presents a choice to each of us. No matter our political opinion and our passions on environmental issues, we can choose to respect the first hand knowledge of one another. We can also choose to accept that not one of us has the right answer, or the fail-safe methodology, for addressing the conditions and management needs within a landscape or ecosystem. We can choose to learn together about our environment and we can choose to learn from one another to develop plans to improve it.

Opportunity Two: Identify Your Purpose and Goals Before Choosing a Process

There are a number of examples across the United States of groups of citizens, governmental entities and agencies and non-governmental organizations working

together on very challenging conservation endeavors. In each case, the group became organized and focused on conservation that they thought needed attention.

If we examine a number of these partnership efforts, we find that the groups that are focused on solving problems usually reach their objectives and are considered success stories in doing so. Most of these efforts are appropriately focused on solving the identified problem or completing a particular project. Much is accomplished through these examples of people with very different values working together to reach achievable goals.

Many of these efforts have been initiated through the leadership of federal, state, county or community agencies to take advantage of the concept of learning from one-another and from the governmental agency's extensive and public resources. In Wyoming, we have been very fortunate to have individuals within our State Department of Agriculture be the masterminds of some of the very first opportunities for motivating private landowners to work with state and federal agencies through a process called Coordinated Resource Management, or CRM.

In each case of people working together there was some problem or situation that provided the basis or incentive for them to work together. In addition to Wyoming's Coordinated Resource Management process, many western states Governor's offices have organized consensus-building offices that provide trained facilitators in the process of consensus building.

In still another example of such support for getting past a generalize impasse regarding natural resource and environmental issues, the Western Governor's

Association, through formal resolution, acknowledged a set of principles in this arena of encouraging diverse interests in working together called “enlibra”.

What has been learned most certainly from these various efforts and approaches to working together is that each can be very effective or a combination of the various processes may be needed depending on the situation and the objectives of the group. It is most certainly clear that the emphasis on working together and to clearly identify the group’s objectives, has a great deal to do with the outcomes of such efforts.

Opportunity Three: Blend the Principles of Learning within the Context of Ecosystem Management Planning

Steve Daniels and Greg Walker developed a soft-systems education approach blended with a negotiation process called Collaborative Learning, after several years of chronicling and documenting various group efforts in the Pacific Northwest as case studies. Their work has been wonderfully refined with an understanding that as one relates such processes in working together on environmental issues, the tendency to consider the process as the key to success is faulty (Daniels and Walker).

They contend that some basic principles of working together on contentious issues can help enhance the potential of success, but do not guarantee outcomes. They also suggest that a true collaborative learning process does not set as goals or objectives any solution to any problem, but rather clearly identifies improvements that are achievable and do not set unattainable expectations for the group membership. This acknowledgement of continually seeking improvements and not solutions dovetails directly into the context of ecosystem management.

If a group’s goal is to develop an ecosystem management plan, the participants will need to recognize that the development of such a plan will require information about

the landscape of focus that provides the scale and amount of information for them to base a plan. They will then need to recognize that their group will need to continue working together always, if they truly intend to develop an ecosystem management plan that is implemented, monitored, and adapted in response to changes that are out of their control or on the basis of monitoring results.

The identification of realistic goals, rather than solving all concerns or making all participants and stakeholders expect solution end points, is a rather straightforward acknowledgement for groups working together on ecosystem management plans. This acknowledgement allows the group to remain focused on reaching objectives while building into the process a dynamic that mimics that of the ecosystem or ecosystems that they are focused on. This can make a huge difference in their ultimate achievements through acceptance that their group will have a purpose into perpetuity.

Opportunity Four: Check Out the Neighborhood or Remember Species of Concern Cross Property Bounaries

It is first important to develop a description of the context of landscape planning for private lands. Private lands are represented on the landscape in the Thunder Basin at about a 50% level of overall landownership. The remaining lands are federally and state owned. The landownership pattern is further complicated as we all recognize that the ownership of these lands is intermixed and not neatly fenced with public lands on one side and private lands on the other.

This means that the relationship by and between the private and the public sector has long been integrated into the way of life in the Thunder Basin. There are very few folks that do not have a direct association with this relationship between public and

private lands. Every community is culturally, socially and economically tied to those associations and relationships.

The private lands in this equation of intermixed land ownership are uniquely important to the conservation of the short-grass prairie ecosystem. Estimates of viable populations of the species of concern in the short-grass prairie ecosystem are impressively high on private lands. Conservation advocacy organizations have long stressed the importance of these private lands in the overall maintenance of biodiversity. And, specific to the short-grass prairie ecosystem, habitat fragmentation is claimed as the single most critical threat to several of the species of concern, including the black-tailed prairie dog.

Opportunity Five: Recognize the Challenge of Implementation of Ecosystem Management on Federal Lands

The focus on conservation during the last fifty years has been primarily on public lands with only some of the serious and successful environmental clean-up efforts focused on public health and the condition of our Nation's rivers, lakes, soils and air on private lands. Out of our Nation's shift to focus on the cost to environmental quality of a post World War II explosion in population, consumer demand and technology, came the ability to recognize and communicate our industrial impact on our environment. As citizens we brought forward a formidable political demand for new laws and regulations to address this cost.

The emphasis on public lands and conservation has a basis in a number of laws. In order to understand some of our tendencies to immediately expect the same approach to ecosystem management planning on private lands as we have seen on public, perhaps a

brief history and highlighting of the legal authorities related to ecosystem management on public lands is helpful.

Each of the four major federal land management agencies (National Park Service, The USDA Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service) must comply with different mandates stated in their own organic acts. These dissimilar mandates can create regulatory uncertainty and compliance attempts to implement ecosystem management across an ecological landscape. Both the Forest Service and the BLM have multiple use mandates that traditionally emphasized resource extraction and production activities.

Although agency planners recognize that they must plan across agency boundaries, they are reluctant to enter into interagency agreements that might compromise their own ability to meet other legally mandated resource policy goals. The current laws provide no mechanism by which the various agencies can confidently make value judgments between conflicting statutory responsibilities in pursuit of ecosystem management. The Forest Service Organic Act began with the Forest Service Reserve Act in 1891 and continued with the Organic Act of 1897, which narrowed the definition of circumstances under which public land could be reserved. In 1911, the US Supreme Court ruled that the Organic Act granted the Forest Service broad regulatory jurisdiction over the "occupancy and use" of forest reserves. Since 1911, the occupancy and use language has been consistently interpreted by the courts as granting the Forest Service broad regulatory and management authority over the national forest lands.

The Bureau of Land management (BLM) was officially established by Congress with the passage of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 or FLPMA.

FLPMA authorized the BLM to manage approximately 350 million acres of public lands to achieve "multiple use values". FLPMA's definition of "multiple use" includes requirements to consider present and future human needs, use resources without permanent impairment of the quality of the environment, and relative economic values of resources. Similar to the Forest Service, BLM's multiple use mandate includes little guidance as to how to balance the forest's various resources or determine the appropriate mix of uses.

There are four additional laws related to federal land management that I will briefly describe before tying this background information back into the opportunity presented through understanding the challenge that federal land management agencies face in ecosystem management and how their challenge has impacted private lands management.

In 1960, the Multiple User and Sustained Yield Act (MUYSA) expanded the "improve and protect" the forest part of the Forest Service's organic mandate by requiring the agency to administer the national forests for "outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, and wildlife and fish purposes". This Act established the first time that a statutory basis for the concept of integrated resource management, but offered no guidance as how to balance the forest' various resources or determine the appropriate mix of uses.

In 1964, The Wilderness Act formally established wilderness preservation as a Forest Service responsibility. When a part of a national forest or national grassland is designated a wilderness area by Congress, the Forest Service must adjust its management philosophy away from multiple use and focus on preservation as a priority. To achieve

its preservation goal, the Act prohibits commercial enterprise, roads, motorized equipment, and structures. The Forest Service often faces conflicting legal authorities between its multiple-use mandate and its commitment to wilderness protection.

Natural resource managers on public lands have been accepting the statutory role of the public in making comments regarding policy-making and project level decision-making on federal lands since 1969. The National Environmental Policy Act, or NEPA, was declared on January first of 1969 "to encourage productive and enjoyable harmony between man and his environment" by ensuring that federal agencies evaluate environmental effects in their decision making processes. The Supreme Court has held the NEPA has two objectives: 1) to require agencies to consider the environmental (and economic) impacts or any proposed action, and 2) to require agencies to show the public that an action's environmental consequences have been evaluated.

The Endangered Species Act (ESA) was enacted by Congress on December 23, 1973. The ESA codified broad protection for all species, plant and animal, encompassing "endangered" as well as "threatened" species. The ESA represents a comprehensive statutory strategy for the prevention of extinction of species by conserving the ecosystems upon which endangered and threatened species depend and by developing programs for conserving those species.

The Act makes the "taking" of an endangered species a federal offense, requires federal agencies to use their authority to conserve listed species, and requires any federal agency contemplating an action that "may effect" a listed species' existence or destroy its habitat. The ESA Amendments of 1978 mandate designation of critical habitat

concurrent with species listing and directed by the Secretary of the Interior to address the economic impacts in determining critical habitat.

Congress specifically directed agencies not to consider economic effects in determining if species are threatened or endangered. Courts have strictly interpreted this provision to give species protection absolute authority over other managerial mandates where listed species are present. Critics of the ESA argue from both economic and ecological perspectives. Local citizens and business interests often criticize the ESA because of the lack of inclusion of human or economic considerations while others are concerned about the ESA's single species orientation as it relates to ecosystem management.

In addition to these highlighted federal mandates, the federal Clear Water Act and Clean Air Act add additional regulatory requirements to specify standards and classifications for water quality and air sheds. To add further to the maze of challenges to ecosystem management planning and implementation on public lands, some state agencies have legal jurisdiction over activities on public lands or share co-management responsibilities with the federal agencies.

For instance, the federal Clean Water Act requires the Forest Service to comply with water quality management requirements of each State. The Forest Service must also comply with substantive and procedural requirements of State and local agencies in managing air quality. In addition, co-management responsibilities exist as State Game and fish agencies have responsibility for wildlife populations while the Forest Service or BLM manages the habitat.

With so many challenging mandates and regulations, federal land and resource planning has been further challenged through administrative appeals and litigation. In the midst of all this conflict, however, the attempt to move to ecosystem management planning and to better involve the public in land and resource management planning continues to be a goal of the federal land management agencies.

Opportunity Six: Recognize the Relationship of Federal Lands Management on Adjacent and Intermixed Private Lands

Many of the collaborative efforts described earlier in this presentation highlighted the effectiveness of private/public partnerships in land stewardship. One of the consequences of the federal land management agencies compliance with all of the laws and regulations of which I only highlighted a few, is that the private land managers and owners adjacent or inter-mixed within the jurisdiction of the federal lands management, are often directly within either critical habitat designated for an endangered species or effected less obviously by the allocation of part of the federal lands for a land and resource use that may conflict with the adjacent private lands management.

Further, there are numerous examples of concerns, appeals, and litigation that directly challenge the private landowners that may be adjacent to the federal lands as well as a permitee for grazing, mining or other mandated uses of those federal lands. The actions taken on federal lands have direct impacts not only economically on the adjacent private land owners, but these actions have a limiting effect on the private landowner's decision space as it relates to their ability to take an ecosystem management approach to management of their lands.

One example of this situation is easily highlighted in the Thunder Basin. The Forest Service had planned to reintroduce black-footed ferret on federal lands adjacent to

a large population of black-tailed prairie dogs on private lands. The Forest Service also had been preparing appropriately for the ferret reintroduction on federal lands for a number of years by providing non-fragmented habitat for the prairie dog.

The management of the black-tailed prairie dog on federal lands created a change in availability of lands for other historical uses of the National Grasslands, including grazing. The private landowners adjacent and intermixed with the federal lands also experienced a marked increase in black-tailed prairie dog populations as this management policy continued several years.

The efforts of the Forest Service to take a look at the big picture and take an ecosystem management approach to their management planning for the black-tailed prairie dog and the black-footed ferret could be enhanced by the adjacent landowners initiating the development of an ecosystem management plan for their private lands. This type of private leadership and initiative has rarely been that of the private sector without a mandated or regulatory ultimatum.

Not only are these federal plans clearly important to the private landowner, they are critically important in their potential impact on the conservation of private land. As we have witnessed a tremendous interest in partnering, collaborating, and cooperating with private landowners from the federal and state natural resource agencies, we have seen a tremendous increase in the political resistance to the government taking the lead in planning on private lands.

Is this because all westerners are born with a resistance to change, a commitment to a lifestyle that affords the luxury of distance from many social and governmental controls, and just plain do not wish to share? I contend that the private landowners have

had the greatest stake in conservation in the West. This is documented in their history of a long relationship with federal lands and the fact that conservation has always been integrated into their business plans. They have a legacy of doing a good job or of facing the consequences of failing in business.

Opportunity Seven: Facilitate Voluntary Private Sector Collaboration in Ecosystem Management Planning and Implementation

If we consider the accomplishments in learning and working together on federal lands and all that has been achieved in the face of a virtual mine-field of regulation and mandate through partnerships in federal land management, and we also have positive examples of state and local government leadership in the facilitation of collaborative stewardship on public and private lands, perhaps the next generation of leadership in conservation presents itself totally in the private sector.

The notion that the responsibility of the private landowner is to comply with government regulatory requirements in conservation has been met with a serious resistance on the basis of private property rights concerns, economic impacts on rural private land-based businesses and single-species driven criteria for reservation of acres of habitat on private lands.

If collaboration is simply defined as “to work with one another”, then where better to begin demonstrating yet another innovation in managing our relationship with our environment, but through the conservation initiative of the private landowner? The voluntary commitment of private landowners to work together is the basis for the formation of the Thunder Basin Grasslands Prairie Ecosystem Association.

The Thunder Basin Grasslands Prairie Ecosystem Association: A Case Study in Process

The Association membership includes over 20 private landowners in the Thunder Basin Grasslands area of eastern Wyoming that control over 200,000 acres of private lands. The Association members are a diverse group of landowners that are ranchers, coal producers, coal-bed methane gas producers, other land and resource based business managers, employees of local businesses and/or owners of small businesses located in the Thunder Basin. The private lands owned by the current membership of the Association are largely contiguous and adjacent to the Thunder Basin National Grasslands, administered by the USDA, Forest Service.

The Thunder Basin National Grassland is over 585,000 acres in size. Of this federal ownership presence, the Association membership lands are adjacent to and intermixed with nearly a total of 300,000 acres. Almost all members of the Association have some permit or lease relationship with the federal and state lands in the Thunder Basin. The ownership mix in this focus area is approximately 50% private to 50% federal, state and other ownership.

In 1999, a group of neighbors initially got together to discuss options as they considered USFWS, other federal and state interest in black-tailed prairie dog populations and the reintroduction of the black-footed ferret, as addressed in the Forest Service's Thunder Basin National Grasslands Plan Revision. These private landowners were particularly concerned about apparent changes in the black-tailed prairie dog populations on federal and private lands. They were also very concerned about taking specific conservation measures about one species without first understanding the relationship of habitat for one species to the habitat conditions needed for other species of concern.

These private landowners thought that they needed more information about a bigger area of land before they could do a good job of addressing habitat concerns for all species. They thought they could address their concerns better and potentially take more effective conservation measures collectively. They organized a Wyoming non-profit corporation and elected a Board of Directors that meets at least monthly.

As they pursued their interest in knowing more about the capacity of their lands before they developed a conservation management plan, they learned about the ecosystem management approach to assess large areas of land and then developing a management strategy. The Association Board, with the guidance of their managing consultant, sought the benefit of an Advisory Committee that could help them in finding the best way to get the job done.

They were successful in assembling a diverse group of Advisors with the credentials to assist them in taking this innovative private land leadership in the conservation of natural resources and the environment. The Board also retained legal counsel that holds outstanding credentials in natural resource and endangered species issues and law.

Development of a credible, scientific and landowner led plan

The Association scheduled and conducted two highly successful and productive meetings with the Advisory Committee since the fall of 2000. The Advisory Committee, Board, and Members meet twice annually. These meetings are voluntary and engage participants in long hours of intense and challenging work.

The Association's credible, scientific approach to meeting their objective goals of conservation of a large area of private lands was developed during these meetings. The

Association has combined these Advisory Committee meetings with opportunities for the membership, federal, state and local government representatives to understand the Thunder Basin better and to understand the Association's approach and commitment to clearly lead in this effort.

Contributing to greater understanding of the need to learn more

During a part of the Advisory Committee meeting early May of 2001, the Association sponsored a day long bus tour of the Thunder Basin that allowed for further understanding of the complex issues and diverse interests in the area. The Association then hosted a follow-up ranch table discussion the next day through which they garnered unanimous support of the Association's ecosystem approach to assessing and managing lands and resources. Participants included representatives from local, state, and federal agencies, as well as, staff from the Governor and Wyoming's Congressional Delegation.

Funding from USFWS to draft an umbrella Conservation Agreement with Assurances

As the Association continued to organize and develop their ecosystem approach to conservation of their lands, the USFWS approved a grant for the development of Candidate Species Agreements with Assurances (CCAA) for the landowners in the Association. The Association negotiated a cooperative agreement with the Service to draft an umbrella CCAA that would incorporate their multi-species and ecosystem approach to conservation in exchange for conservation measures on their private lands.

The Association submitted a draft umbrella CCAA in March of 2001. The landowner members offered a voluntary long-term commitment to keep 150,000 acres of private lands in ongoing grasslands management while participating in the development of an Ecosystem Management Plan that would cover all private lands, as well as, incorporate intermixed and adjacent federal, state and other lands. This draft has not

been accepted by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, however, the Association members have continued in their mission of voluntary and collaborative development of an ecosystem management plan for their lands.

The Association membership agreed to voluntarily complete an Ecosystem Management Plan that will involve three steps: 1) an Ecosystem Assessment, 2) an Ecosystem Management Strategy and, 3) any appropriate Conservation Agreements for their private lands within the Thunder Basin of Wyoming, which may include additional land management issues based on the assessment and management strategy.

This means that the private landowners are taking conservation measures immediately through their commitment of 200,000 acres of land to prevent habitat fragmentation and maintain grassland prairie dog habitat that is considered essential in the conservation of black-tailed prairie dog and other species of concern. The current USFWS policy regarding Conservation Agreements with Assurances allows landowners incentives for taking actions on the ground in exchange for assurance that the participating landowners will not be required to take further action in the event of listing of any species as threatened per ESA. These privately and adjacent federally managed grasslands are recognized as essential habitat for eight species of concern, including the endangered black-footed ferret and Ute ladies' tresses.

Commitment of private acres and taking the lead in learning

Association members are making a substantial commitment to taking conservation measures through the protection of the present habitat on their lands while they embark on the assessment of their lands collectively. They realize that their approach may not fit a traditional model of single-species or even multi-species habitat

management. They also realize that their commitment is of value to the public and furthers the mission of the federal and state agencies entrusted to ensure habitat for all grasslands species.

Seeking ways to encourage better understanding of grasslands ecology

The Association has also recognized that they are not the only members of the public that do not have enough information about the grasslands and the species of concern. Through one of the Advisory Committee members and their consultant, they were successful in benefiting from an indirect grant from the Bradley Fund for the Environment to sponsor this symposium, as well as, to initiate the geographic information mapping and population assessments last summer.

They hoped to stimulate discussion in the scientific research community about grasslands ecology, gaps in available information and identification for research opportunities. The Association hopes to hold a symposium annually and to integrate Association finding into this process of sharing new information, monitoring of effectiveness of current management policies and continuing dialogue with landowners and the public.

Forging new relationships with federal neighbors

The Association recognized and appreciated the opportunity that the USFWS presented them in drafting a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances. They also initiated discussions with the Forest Service to define the best way to effectively share information that they attain through the ecosystem assessment. Discussions over the last six months have resulted in an informal agreement that the Forest Service will share information with the Association and that the national Grasslands Supervisor supports the ecosystem management approach in principle.

The Association is committed to formalizing their relationship with the Forest Service, because both the USFWS and the Forest Service play a serious and important role in the effective conservation of threatened and endangered species, as well as, in the sustained productive management of grasslands habitat. The Association is seeking the support for the formalization of their entity as an "affected party" through a memorandum of understanding that affords a two way sharing of information at an appropriate and equitable level and participate in any Section 7 review of livestock grazing and other activities on the federal land.

Plague confirmed in black-tailed prairie dog populations

During the Association sponsored tour of the area in early May 2001, the USFWS representatives were asked by several private landowners to retrieve appropriate samples in order to test black-tailed prairie dog colonies for evidence of sylvatic plague. Plague was confirmed within ten days of sampling in prairie dog colonies on both private and federal lands. These colonies include those covered by a very recent shooting ban imposed on federal lands within the proposed core area for reintroduction of black-footed ferret.

The Association recognizes that there is an immediate need for information on population levels, existing habitat, existing habitat characteristics, identification of conservation activities that may be undertaken, and identification of benefits to candidate grasslands species. They are deeply concerned about the impact of the confirmation of plague on conservation efforts within the Thunder Basin for all species of concern.

Landowner-driven conservation

The Association membership has a tremendous need for help and support from federal, state and local government. They wish to retain and demonstrate land stewardship and conservation leadership that is integrated into their own private land and resource management plans. They believe that they can demonstrate, through this pilot project, that finding out information about the ecology of the Thunder Basin will allow them to develop a long-term all species conservation plan that will benefit all species while maintaining and enhancing the private land habitat. The Association members believe that their approach is timely and should be a good example for private landowners nationally.

Funding Needs for Collaboration and the Development of an Ecosystem Management Plan

The Association has learned a great deal in the last eighteen months of organizational development. The greatest challenge in their innovation is finding ways to fund their collaborative efforts and to complete an ecological assessment of their 200,000 acres of land in the next two years.

The Board immediately sought funding for the organizational development of the Association. They have been successful in receiving a grant of $45,000 annually from the State of Wyoming that required in-kind match funding. Volunteer hours and cost to the Association have far exceeded this grant amount. The Association has achieved an in-kind balance for future matching funding of nearly $150,000 to date.

They have learned quickly about the traditional approaches in funding of collaborative efforts and have found that most funding is targeted at partnerships that involve federal lands management. Other traditional private landowner incentive

programs offered through the US Fish and Wildlife Service, including the Candidate Species Agreement with Assurances, are pre-mature in that the Association does not have the ecological information needed to consider what conservation tools or incentives may be best to utilize.

This Pilot/Demonstration Project that will involve a five-year process on the 200,000 acres and adjacent public lands of almost equal size, totaling 300,000 acres. The process will be led by the Board of Directors (private landowners) with advice and participation of their Advisory Committee, General Counsel and direct oversight of the managing consultant. The Association will achieve all work through third-party contracts.

Innovation

This Pilot/Demonstration marks an innovation in conservation and in the conservation of private lands. The capacity of the lands and resources will be addressed in a part of the Thunder Basin of significant size, without regard to political boundaries or land ownership.

The Association is communicating in new ways with the Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, state agencies, local officials and others that will serve to demonstrate that different approaches to conservation and management of natural resources should be encouraged, supported and embraced. Although the present funding authorities, and the assurance allowed private landowners through the Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurance policy may require innovation and creativity from federal agencies to achieve, the Association continues to wish to proceed with their commitment to action.

Association private landowner commitment

These private landowners are committing to keeping grassland habitat intact through their continued management of their private lands. They simultaneously commit to the ecosystem management planning process and will use the information that results in the development of whatever conservation measures are determined necessary. The Association is seeking the financial incentive to accomplish the ecosystem assessment, strategy and conservation plans. This appears to be a fair and appropriate exchange for the commitment of 200,000 acres of private land to be conserved through continued grasslands management that affords continued habitat for all species of concern.

These private landowners in the Thunder Basin have managed a long-term relationship with the short-grass prairie ecosystem, maintained a non-fragmentation of habitat for short-grass prairie species, as well as, provided goods and services to our society. They have continued and persevered to keep their businesses and families fed and cared for by being good land and resource stewards. They have taken on this responsibility willingly and tenaciously with respect for each other, as well as, for the lands and resources they depend upon.

I trust that the opportunities that I have highlighted give each of you a sense of both the challenges and the promise of voluntary private lands collaborations in the development of landscape and ecosystem management plans. In summary, the opportunities that I have highlighted today for innovation in collaborative approaches to landscape planning included:

Opportunity One: Commit to Learning Together and From One Another
Opportunity Two: Identify Your Purpose and Goals Before Choosing a Process

Opportunity Three: Blend the Principles of Learning within the Context of Ecosystem Management Planning

Opportunity Four: Check Out the Neighborhood and Remember that Species of Concern Cross Property Boundaries

Opportunity Five: Recognize the Challenge of Implementation of Ecosystem Management on Federal Lands

Opportunity Six: Recognize the Relationship of Federal Lands Management on Adjacent and Intermixed Private Lands

Opportunity Seven: Facilitate Voluntary Private Sector Collaboration in Ecosystem Management Planning and Implementation

In conclusion, the single greatest challenge to innovation in the landscape planning on private lands is the willingness of all of us to think out of the box and come up with ways to financially support this paradigm shift in conservation. We all will have achieved a great deal when all private landowners are afforded the confidentiality of private sector business operations, the respect of their private property rights, and the documented success of integration of conservation into their adaptive management plans for their private lands and resources into perpetuity.