



Thunder Basin Grasslands Prairie Ecosystem Association: *A COLLABORATIVE, LANDOWNER LED INITIATIVE*

By Denise Langley

INTRODUCTION

The mission of the Thunder Basin Grasslands Prairie Ecosystem Association (the Association or TBGPEA) is to work collaboratively towards an ecosystem management plan for the landscape that integrates the ranching, mining, and other economic and social interests of the Association members with conservation objectives. Specifically, the Association is interested in developing a responsible, common sense, science-based approach to long-term management of its lands. The Association strongly supports this mission. However, this mission could not be articulated in this manner in 1999. It has taken us a number of years to build the collaborative effort, and to specifically define the process. Let me relate the history of this collaborative effort.

HISTORY OF THE ASSOCIATION

The initial impetus for the Association occurred at a meeting organized by Jim Schwartz (Wyoming Department of Agriculture) and Dave Lockman (Wyoming Game and Fish Department) to discuss the potential for development of a management plan for species of concern in the Thunder Basin National Grasslands and surrounding private lands. The thought was that if such a plan could be developed and implemented, it would provide sufficient conservation actions to keep species of concern from being listed under the Endangered Species Act within Wyoming. Twenty ranchers attended the meeting and represented a block of land of approximately 240,000 acres.

Following the initial meeting, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in Denver was approached about working on a Grasslands Prairie Ecosystem Management Plan. The USFWS expressed an interest in working with the group to develop a habitat conservation plan.

In July of 1999, the group met twice. At one meeting, a goal was set to develop a habitat conservation plan that would address nine species: the black-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*), mountain plover (*Charadrius montanus*), sage grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*), burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*), Swainson's hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*), swift fox (*Vulpes velox*), and golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*). At a second meeting, the group decided to hire a consultant to serve as the plan coordinator. We also stated the need to compile baseline information and identified some possible sources of this information.

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The group met again in August and heard a proposal from an attorney from Washington, DC, who proposed to prepare a habitat conservation plan for the group. This offer was declined. At this meeting, the landowners decided that they needed to take the lead in this planning effort. We appreciated the assistance we were receiving from the

Wyoming departments of Agriculture and Game and Fish as well as the USFWS, but we also decided that we needed to be the leaders in this effort.

At meetings during the fall of 1999 and the winter of 2000, we recognized that we would need funding support to develop the habitat conservation plan. We began the search for this funding. We had discussions on the scope of the plan and identified the need to integrate ranching, energy development, and species needs. We met with the coalmines in operation in the landscape, and all agreed to join in the effort. We filed for incorporation as a non-profit association with the state of Wyoming.

During spring 2000, we made the decision to replace the consultant we had hired as the plan coordinator with a new consultant, who became the managing consultant for the Association. With additional discussions, we changed the emphasis of our plan from that of habitat conservation to a more encompassing ecosystem management plan. We received some funding from the Wyoming Governor's office that enabled us to continue supporting the managing consultant and to move forward with our planning efforts. We also received training on range monitoring procedures and how to identify the nine species of concern.

We decided in the summer and fall of 2000 to create an advisory committee. With the assistance of the managing consultant, we identified individuals with expertise in grazing, endangered species management, energy production, ecosystem management, and collaborative, legal, and political processes. We obtained funding from the USFWS to assist in development of a draft Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA), and entered into a cooperative agreement with the agency for this purpose.

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In the spring of 2001, we held a tour of the landscape that was attended by individuals from many agencies, the Association, and others. We also received support from the Bradley Fund for the Environment to conduct an initial survey of prairie dog colonies on Association lands, to compile existing GIS information, and to host a symposium. Some of the Board traveled to Washington, DC, to meet with agency personnel in a meeting hosted by Senator Enzi.

During the summer and fall of 2001, Ecosystem Management Research Institute (EMRI) surveyed the prairie dog colonies on Association lands and we held a symposium on developing a knowledge base for ecosystem-management planning.

During the winter and spring of 2002, we entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the United States Forest Service (USFS) for information exchange and to work on weed control. We sought the release of additional USFWS funding for conducting an ecological assessment. We received these monies, but too late to begin assessment work during that field season. We did enter into a Professional Services Agreement with EMRI for assistance in conducting an ecological assessment. We sought continued support to conduct the assessment and to develop the plan through an earmark appropriation.

By the fall of 2002, the Board had developed sufficient knowledge and abilities to take over the direct management of the Association's operations. Our managing consultant had completed the task of assisting the Association to get to this point and ended her services.

In 2003, the Association received an earmark of USFWS funds for support of our efforts, to begin work on the ecological assessment, and to support other Association activities. We initiated the ecological assessment. We also launched a cooperative weed project with the USFS.

DISCUSSION

The Association has learned a great deal over the past five years and has developed linkages and cooperative working relationships with the public land-management, regulatory, and assistance agencies. These relationships have evolved over time, as agency and Association members learned more about each other, developed individual contacts, conducted joint projects and, in general, gained greater trust and understanding. The Association now has a Cooperative Agreement with the USFWS for developing the ecological assessment and the ecosystem management plan, and Memoranda of Understanding with the USFS and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The Association has worked well with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, has discussed future cooperative efforts with the Wyoming Department of Lands, and has a close working relationship with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), i.e. the NRCS State Conservationist is part of the Association's Advisory Committee.

Before many of these relationships could truly develop into cooperative efforts, the Association needed to establish its purpose and direction, for itself and so that agencies could see and understand where it was headed. Now, all parties recognize the merits and, in fact, the necessity of the collaborative and cooperative effort to include the overall landscape, rather than stopping at each property line. These relationships are critical, but have taken time and effort to develop.

The present status of the Association is very promising. We have clearly articulated goals and objectives. We have charted a path for completion of an ecological assessment. We understand



Members of the Thunder Basin Grasslands Prairie Ecosystem Association want to preserve habitat for all native species, which includes the golden eagle, the sage grouse, and prairie dog. Photo: J. Haufler

the process for developing an ecosystem management plan and how we can use this plan to enter into appropriate management agreements. We have a supportive membership that shares in these desires, goals, and objectives, and has shown patience and persistence in staying the course. We have good working relationships with all of the appropriate agencies, both state and federal, in the landscape. We have acquired funding to support these efforts to date, although you will [read] more on this later [in these proceedings]. So, while the Association is only partway to achieving its objectives, it is well positioned to move forward effectively.

We learned early on that this initiative would take some time. This is for several reasons. First, we needed time to learn about the issues, to develop an understanding of what was needed, and to identify and articulate our desired process for getting there. The Association, as a group, is now much more knowledgeable about all the resource-management issues in the landscape and approaches to addressing these issues. For example, Betty Pellatz, as our chairperson, went to Washington, DC, last October to seek funding support for the Association. While there, she talked effectively about resource issues in the landscape and about the ecosystem-management approach the Association is using to such government personnel as Lynn Scarlett, assistant secretary of the Department of Interior, Bruce Knight, chief of NRCS, and Tom Thompson, deputy chief of the USFS.

The process has taken time because it also requires funding to achieve the objectives. To obtain funding, we first needed to have our objectives and processes identified, to find sources, and then to successfully apply. This has not been easy, as you will hear later. Through all of this development and learning, the members of the Association have had to be patient and wait for the results they desire.

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A big component of the whole initiative has been the building of trust. Initially, trust needed to be built among the ranchers to assure the members that the Association was a beneficial activity with the interests of all in mind, and that it didn't have hidden agendas of a few. There was also the need to build trust between the ranchers and the energy production companies. Ranching and energy production often are at odds, particularly where subsurface rights are owned by the government, rather than by the surface owner. Mineral rights are varied within the planning landscape, but the federal government owns mineral rights under many private lands. This can lead to distrust between energy production companies and ranchers. The Association has brought both the companies and ranchers together, and both have developed trust and a shared commitment to the initiative.

One of the biggest tasks was to build trust with agencies. Relationships before the Association was formed varied with each agency. The USFWS was viewed in a regulatory role and considered as having a primary role in restricting ranching activities. The USFS and BLM were neighboring lands, leasers of grazing rights, and sources for prairie dog expansions. NRCS was primarily in a support role with the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funds and similar programs for water developments or other activities. State Game and Fish assisted and interacted with wildlife issues, and state lands provided grazing leases.

Now, the Association is working directly with all agencies to coordinate the development of the ecosystem management plan. The specifics of how this will be accomplished is still being determined, but over the last several years there has been a considerable increase in interactions with the agencies, and with that has come learning and understanding of the issues each party faces. This has led to an increased level of trust.

Finally, the Association needed to develop a level of trust in its technical support, in this case, EMRI, for collecting information on private lands, keeping this information proprietary to the landowners, and effectively representing the Association's interests in planning activities. This building of trust among all of the mentioned parties has taken time, but has been critical to the initiative.

The Association has identified several additional key elements that we think have contributed to our success to date. First, as mentioned, the members of the Association have had considerable patience. It is human nature to desire a quick fix. Members would have liked to have attended a few meetings and had a product in hand that solved the issues. Our collaborative effort hasn't worked that way. We are five years into this initiative and still a couple of years away from producing the desired agreements—if we can continue to find the funding needed to complete the work. Our members have had to maintain their commitment to the effort without many tangible products in hand.

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Our success to get to where we are today has also been due to the willingness of our members to learn more about the issues, listen to the ideas of others, and seek workable solutions. It has also hinged on the willingness of agency personnel to be similarly open to new ideas and to seek workable solutions with the Association.

Our success has stemmed from the development of a clear direction of our objectives and the process to obtain them. As stated earlier, the Association needed to learn about and identify the specific process it wanted to utilize. It then needed to begin the implementation of this process. We have maintained control of this process: It is a privately led effort. If we didn't maintain this control, our members would not have stayed with the Association. This is an aspect of this project that is somewhat unique.

We have also tried to not overrun our headlights. We have recognized that patience is not just remaining supportive and engaged with the initiative, but also identifying appropriate actions at appropriate times. For the first four years of the effort, we tried to maintain a relatively low profile. We did host the first symposium, which we thought was highly successful in compiling information needed for development of an ecosystem management plan, but purposely we did not actively seek publicity for the Association. We didn't hide from it, but we did not want to be touting the successes of the Association prior to having little more than rhetoric to show. Over the last year, we've been able to launch our ecological assessment and to build more specific cooperative programs and projects with agencies. So we think it's now more appropriate for us to tell others about what we're doing. Perhaps with more publicity early on, more funding support may have been available sooner, but until we were completely comfortable with our direction and process, we didn't think we were ready to be in a potential spotlight, or to build false expectations of what we would be able to accomplish and under what timelines.

We have addressed a number of challenges along the way. One of the challenges faced by the Association has been the time commitments required of members, especially of the Board. Finding time to attend all of the meetings that are needed, as well as to tackle the various projects, is difficult.

Finding the funding needed to conduct our work has also been a challenge. Our third challenge was getting all parties to share in the vision of what's desired. This is still ongoing and will continue to challenge the initiative. However, the members of the Association now share a vision, and many in the agencies do as well. A challenge still lies ahead in getting this vision into workable agreements that cross the various ownerships and bureaucracies. Some of what we are proposing has required broadened thinking by many of the landowners and agency personnel.

CONCLUSION

So what can we conclude about our landowner-led, collaborative effort? We can identify several benefits:

First, the Association has made substantial progress in this initiative. While we still have more to do, we can see how we can obtain the vision we have established.

Second, we've learned a number of important lessons along the way. We have learned the value of patience, the importance of developing trust, and the need to learn more about the issues and methods for addressing them.

We have overcome a number of challenges, including increasing levels of trust, finding funding, allocating the time required to move the initiative forward, expanding the scope of thinking, and maintaining a commitment to a long-term effort.

We have developed what we think is an effective team of diverse landowners, our advisors, technical support with EMRI, and working relationships with agencies.

Finally, it is important to state that we are committed to seeing this initiative through. If we can all stay focused on seeking workable solutions, continue to build trust, and continue to find the needed funding support, we can be successful.

What I have described is an overview of what the Association has learned over the past five years. We think that we can achieve on-the-ground results for ecosystem management across this multiple-ownership landscape. The Thunder Basin is a remarkable area that we know of as our home. We want to continue to live and work here, and sustain the area for all of its values.

