



# HIGH PLAINS PARTNERSHIP: RESTORING AMERICA'S PRAIRIES AND DESERT GRASSLANDS

By Bob Luce

(The following are outline notes from Mr. Luce's presentation.)

## *Introduction*

High Plains Partnership (HPP) is about private land and putting collaborative programs, including the Farm Bill, to work for both agricultural producers and Species at Risk!!!

HPP had its beginning when the lesser prairie chicken was petitioned for Endangered Species Act (ESA) listing in 1995. Fish and Wildlife Service sponsored "Ranch Conversations" to engage private landowner interest.

## *Summary of Early High Plains Partnership Efforts*

- Private landowners embraced the program.
- Delivered a big, inter-regional ecosystem project with modest funding and few staff.
- Unprecedented landowner support and demand.
- Partner networks were put in place for full-scale delivery over an expanded area.

## *High Plains Partnership Goals*

- Reduce or remove the need to list High Plains candidate species and species at-risk under the ESA.
- Conserve and restore two million acres of short, mixed and desert grassland habitats in 10 years
- Improve the economic viability of landowners that voluntarily manage for declining species.
  - Offer a diverse array of financial incentives.
  - Cost-shared habitat improvement practices.
  - Contracts or easements.
  - Direct payments to modify the use of working agricultural lands, without land retirement or set-asides.
- Improve the working relationship between agencies and landowners.

## *High Plains Partnership - Strategy*

- Catalyze the success of the HPP on the ground.
  - Use new funding to add  $\geq 2$  grassland biologists per state.
- Facilitate focused delivery of Farm Bill conservation provisions to benefit at-risk species.
  - Pursue National and state-level agreements between the Department of the Interior (DOI) and the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) that promote the HPP.

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- Encourage joint funding and co-location of HPP biologists among federal, state, and private partners.
- Implement multi-species, landscape scale habitat restoration projects within the focal areas that the partners have identified.

DOI fiscal year 2005 budget request of \$5 million in new money to Partners for the Fish and Wildlife (PFW) Program for 35,000 acres of grasslands and 1,000 acres of riparian. HPP will “jump start” an even larger conservation effort.

*The long-term money will come via the Farm Bill*

- The conservation title of the Farm Bill
  - Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) - \$ 9 B
  - Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) - \$ 360 M Cost-shared Practices
  - Conservation Security Program (CSP) - \$ 2 B
  - Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) - \$ 254 M
  - Farmland Protection Program (FPP) - \$ 985 M
- Base funding increase for Partners for the Fish and Wildlife (PFW) Program
- State and private contributions via new or established programs: Landowner Incentive Program (LIP), State Wildlife Grant (SWG) Program, and the Private Stewardship Grant Program (PSGP).

*Best Conservation Practices*

Working with NRCS, we developed a list of conservation practices that the partners believe will conserve HPP species at risk and integrate with existing practices. Practices must address landowner needs and wildlife habitat.

- Removing woody vegetation
- Fencing for grazing management
- Intensifying grazing
- Developing grazing plans
- Developing drought plans
- Creating artificial burrows for relocation

The suggested Conservation Practices address habitat needs for 15 species of grassland birds, three grassland mammals, and the sage grouse.

Every piece of land cannot be managed for every grassland wildlife species. What is good for the prairie dog is not necessarily good for the lesser prairie chicken. Oversight from experienced biologists will be necessary to determine the best management for each piece of land, farm, or ranch. Farm Bill programs work for both wildlife and landowners when properly implemented. Is it habitat for wildlife or livestock? It can be both! It all depends on how you manage it!

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