



## Thunder Basin Grasslands Prairie Ecosystem Association: *AN INTRODUCTION*

*By Betty Pellatz*

The Thunder Basin Grasslands Prairie Ecosystem Association (TBGPEA) is a non-profit association of landowners within a designated landscape in eastern Wyoming. The mission of the TBGPEA [also called the Association] is to work collaboratively to develop a land management plan for the landscape that will integrate ranching, mining, and other economic and social interests 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 started in 1999. We currently have 23 members, 20 of whom are ranchers. Three others are energy production companies, specifically coal mining companies that operate within the landscape. Membership in the Association falls into two categories: Full membership status is open to anyone who owns lands within the landscape and includes voting rights for the appointment of the Board of Directors and other Association business. We also have Associate Membership status, which does not include voting rights, that is available to anyone who is interested in the TBGPEA and its activities. I serve as the chair of the TBGPEA Board of Directors. Denise Langley is the Vice-chairperson, and Jewell Reed is our Treasurer. Other TBGPEA Board members include Frank Eathorne, Wanda Burget, Lona Nachtman, and Jim Shepperson.

### *DISCUSSION*

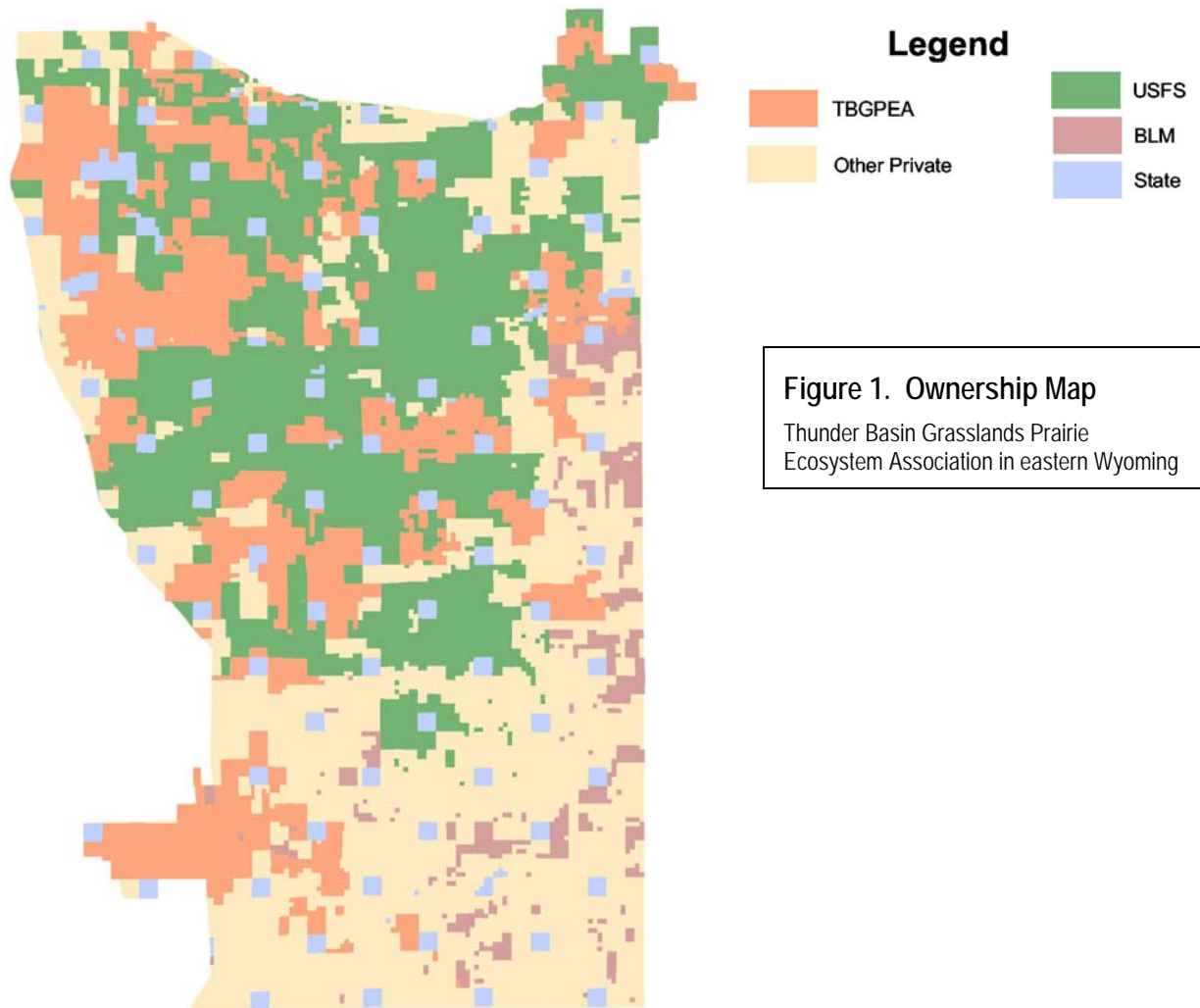
The TBGPEA is a collaboration of landowners within a defined planning landscape. The landscape boundaries were established several years ago, to delineate an area that included the lands of those interested in developing the collaborative effort at that time. We wanted the area to be large enough to address the conservation objectives we had identified, but not so big that we couldn't manage its size and complexity. The landscape that we delineated is 931,000 acres in size, and is generally bounded on the west by Route 59, which runs between Douglas and Gillette, and on the north by Highway 450, which runs east/west, just south of Wright. On the east, the landscape is bounded by the western-most five miles of Niobrara County and the southwestern corner of Weston County; to the south it's bounded by the township line between Township 34 and 35N.

Full membership in the TBGPEA is open to any private landowner within these boundaries. Members are allowed to include lands that they own outside of the boundaries...thus the inclusion of various lands west of Route 59 and North of 450.

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Current members of the Association own over 250,000 acres within this landscape. Other major landowners include private landowners, who are not members of TBGPEA, as well as the United States Forest Service (USFS) with 293,000 acres of the Thunder Basin National Grasslands; 56,000 acres of state lands; and 35,000 acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

lands. Although there are large blocks of private and public lands in the TBGPEA landscape (see Figure 1 below) the ownership is very intermixed. Thus illustrating one of the challenges of collaborative, ecosystem management, that of addressing the complex objectives of public and private landowners within this diverse landscape.



As mentioned previously, the TBGPEA is comprised largely of ranchers, many of whom are third and fourth generation. Ancestors of some of the members were the original homesteaders in this area. As ranchers, we have close ties to the land. We take pride in earning our livelihood from these lands and in practicing good land management. We want to maintain our ranching business, but we appreciate the diversity of wildlife in the area as well. We appreciate our lands and those around us for all of their diverse values. Ranching operations in the landscape are largely cow/calf cattle operations, but there are also a good number of sheep operations, with a number of ranches running both cattle and sheep. The economics of these ranch operations are very tight and can be influenced by such factors as market prices and the amount of precipitation we receive in a year. Landowners in the TBGPEA may also obtain revenues from coal, oil, or gas development, if these resources occur on their ranches, and the rancher owns the mineral rights.

The landscape supports a large percentage of the country's production of coal and contains the largest producing coalmine in the country. The coal industry is a huge economic factor to the local communities and to counties with underlying coal reserves.

Three energy production companies are members of the TBGPEA and their use of the land is obviously very different than that of the ranchers. A collaborative effort involving both ranchers and energy production companies is not common, but is a real strength for our Association. The energy production companies are involved in the TBGPEA because they recognize their roles and influence within the larger landscape. A challenge to the Association is the integration of these diverse land uses in ways that will meet our mission of addressing our conservation objectives while allowing continued economic uses that are essential to the families and communities in the area.

The landscape has substantial oil and gas production and is seeing a rapid expansion in coal-bed methane development in areas with coal reserves near the surface. Many Association members earn revenues from these activities: Some own mineral rights and receive revenues from oil or gas extraction; some are supported by second jobs in the oil and gas industry.



*Still supporting a bounty of native wildlife and vegetation, the prairie lands of Thunder Basin are used for a variety of purposes, from cattle ranching to coal mining.*

*Photo: J. Haufler*

While the landscape has sustained these economic activities, it also supports considerable biodiversity. It's recognized as one of the most significant grassland areas in the country, supporting a nearly full complement of short and mixed, grassland-dependent species native to the area. There are sizable populations of antelope (*Antilocapra americana*), mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), and white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*). Considerable hunting opportunities exist within the landscape.

The area has a relatively small but healthy and expanding elk (*Cervus canadensis*) herd. This herd is of interest to many, both from the opportunities it provides for viewing and hunting as well as its potential impacts to ranching operations as the herd continues to increase in size.

Black-tailed prairie dogs (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) are numerous in the landscape, although recent outbreaks of sylvatic plague have reduced numbers throughout the area. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is very interested in this landscape as a significant conservation area for prairie dogs, and the landscape has been discussed as a potential site for reintroduction of black-footed ferrets (*Mustela nigripes*). Black-tailed prairie dogs, their conservation needs, and their management are controversial subjects, with this landscape being one of the priority areas for addressing the complexities of this species. Ranchers, as a group, are not advocates of expanding

prairie dog populations, but our Association is interested in providing for prairie dog populations within the landscape of sufficient size to provide for conservation objectives, but also in a manner that is compatible with ranching operations.

Sage grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) populations occur in the planning landscape in areas supporting appropriate amounts of sagebrush. With current concerns for this species, its conservation in the area is of increasing concern.

The area supports populations of other species, including burrowing owls (*Athene cunicularia*), ferruginous hawks (*Buteo regalis*), mountain plovers (*Charadrius montanus*), loggerhead shrikes (*Lanius ludovicianus*), golden eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*), long-billed curlews (*Numenius americanus*), upland sandpipers (*Bartramia longicauda*), and many others. It has been identified as an Important Bird Area within Wyoming. It has been identified by the High Plains Partnership as a high priority area, by the Prairie Conservation Network as a primary focus area, and by various other groups. Clearly, this landscape is one of diverse value, both to the landowners who live and make their livelihoods from the land and to the diversity of nature that occurs here.

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- The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation just recently provided us with support for our ecological assessment work.

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