

Conservationists prepare program for Plains

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The way some conservationists see it, both grasslands and small towns on the Great Plains are in serious decline. The same conservationists believe restoring the former will help the latter survive.

Now two conservation groups want to turn concepts into reality.

The Grassland Foundation in Lincoln and the World Wildlife Fund office in Bozeman, Mont., are launching a program called Grasslands 2010: Creating a Natural Amenity Economy for the Northern Great Plains.

The program, to be announced next week in Lincoln, seeks to create biodiversity conservation areas from willing, private land sellers equaling 10 percent of the 279,000-square mile area that encompasses the Northern Great Plains.

The region involves parts of five states and two provinces, including a large section of western and central Nebraska.

While the areas would be managed for flora and fauna, they also would be open to outdoor recreation, which the conservation partners believe would attract all manner of eco-tourists: hunters, anglers, equestrians, hikers, and bird- and wildlife-watchers.

In addition to infusing tourism dollars into rural towns, the conservation areas would create jobs for their management and upkeep.

And they also could attract people who would want to live and start businesses near expansive and truly wild grasslands, much as the Rocky Mountains fueled population growth in Colorado and other states, said Tyler Sutton, president of the Grassland Foundation, which changed its name from the Conservation Alliance of the Great Plains earlier this year.

To have an impact, both for wildlife and as tourist destinations, the areas would need to be large, 100,000 acres or more. Funding would come from public and private sources.

While the groups would involve local and federal governments, they aren't talking about creating a new government program or even federal ownership of the areas.

They would seek land from willing sellers only — eminent domain would not be used — and the areas would be owned by public-private partnerships, involving landowners, local and state governments and nonprofits, Sutton said.

The conservation leaders also stressed this model would not replace ranching and farming, ala the Buffalo Commons theory, Sutton said.

"Cattle will always be king in Nebraska," he said. "We can have a wildlife economy and a vibrant cattle culture and economy side by side."

Most residents and observers of rural communities will agree agriculture alone can't stem population declines and the loss of economic opportunity in the Great Plains. Yet the prairies that supported ranching provide the key to tapping into another economic opportunity.

The Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City reported \$108 billion is spent annually on hunting, fishing and wildlife viewing. Nebraska's piece of that pie is about \$500 million, Sutton said, despite the fact less than 5 percent of the state's land area is in protected wildlife lands.

In the Northern Great Plains as a whole, no more than 1 percent of the grasslands are protected.

Grasslands 2010 seeks, in five years, to put in

place policies, funding and community-based programs that will lead to the long-term goal of conservation areas.

In the short term, the partners will publish reports and host meetings to ignite discussions among politicians, policy-makers, governmental agencies, academics and most of all, rural leaders.

"It's absolutely crucial that the impetus for this is going to have to come from those communities that are affected," Sutton said.

While conserving land for habitat and economic development may sound like a concept or a theory, it's already under way in other places.

Curt Freese, director of the World Wildlife Fund's Northern Great Plains program, mentioned large-scale prairie restoration projects in eastern Montana and Grasslands National Park in Canada near the Montana border.

In southern Africa, wildlife is big business.

"It's going to take a lot of people, a lot of institutions, working together to make this work,"

Freese said. "But the time is ripe, because it's so clear the region can't stand on the single leg of agriculture much longer."

Great Plains lecture in Lincoln

Curt Freese, director of the World Wildlife Fund's Northern Great Plains Program in Bozeman, Mont., will present "Catlin & Cattle: Resurrecting the Great Plains Wildlife Economy," April 29 at the Great Plains Art Museum, 1155 Q St.

Freese, who has a Ph.D. in ecology from Johns Hopkins University, has written three books about the links between economics and biodiversity conservation. He will discuss "Oceans of Grass," a conservation assessment the WWF helped publish last year, and will also discuss the fund's involvement in a new program called Grasslands 2010.

The lecture will start at 3:30 p.m. and is open to the public. For more information, call 472-3082 or go to www.unl.edu/plains.

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