

Group tries to move protected grasslands concept from textbook to public discourse

SEPTEMBER 22, 2005 | BY JOE DUGGAN

Rural Nebraskans could have economic vitality, a world-class tourist destination and wildlife diversity that could rival any ecosystem on the planet just by taking advantage of what's growing under their feet.

Proponents say large-scale protected grasslands in Nebraska have the potential to generate millions of dollars and hundreds of jobs in economically stagnant areas that have lost population for decades. At the same time, huge tracts of public and private conservation lands could restore wildlife populations and diversity to levels that haven't been seen in the state in 200 years.

In other words, the areas could be good for people and wildlife.

But not a single acre will be protected without a buy-in by private landowners, small-town leaders, government agencies, nonprofit organizations and policy leaders. And that won't happen unless key players start talking about it.

The Grassland Foundation, a Lincoln-based conservation group, wants to move the the concept out of the think tank and get key players talking. To ignite the discussion, the foundation recently released a report titled "Economic Benefits of Grassland Protected Areas."

"This is really a collection of ideas and anecdotal evidence to suggest there is already a fairly significant wildlife-based economy in the state," said Tyler Sutton, president of the Grassland Foundation. "The question is: Can that be further developed?"

The report is related to a program called Grasslands 2010, sponsored by the foundation and the

World Wildlife Fund. The program 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.

Creating large protected areas would provide flora and fauna the habitat and space to thrive in ways they cannot under the current patchwork of private and public lands. But just as importantly, Sutton said, the areas would be as ecologically unique as the Rocky Mountains and just as attractive to eco-tourists — wildlife watchers, hunters, anglers, hikers and equestrians.

The program differs from the controversial Buffalo Commons theory because it does not suggest removing people or traditional agriculture from the landscape. Nor would the money to acquire land from willing sellers come solely from the government.

Sutton and other proponents believe the concept will succeed only if local leaders join forces with government agencies and private conservation groups to develop a system that is managed locally.

"We fully recognize that for this to occur, there's going to have to be community-based support in the grasslands," he said."

While Grasslands 2010 involves the entire Northern Great Plains, the foundation's new report focuses specifically on Nebraska.

It is not an economic analysis, but a collection of ideas, trends, statistics and anecdotal evidence to

make the case that this concept is worth serious consideration and action, Sutton said.

Central goals of the report:

-Agriculture should, and will, continue to dominate land use in rural Nebraska, but where feasible, wildlife recreation and nature-based activities should be part of rural development planning.

-Building a nature-based economy should include private lands and become a rural development and conservation priority in the state.

-Land use and ownership change should be driven by community-based institutions and partnerships, requiring new forms of public/private land management.

To achieve the goals, the report offers seven recommendations. They include a comprehensive economic analysis of nature-based activities by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, a policy goal of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission to place 10 percent of remaining grasslands in a network of habitat complexes and encouraging a 1 million-acre grassland preserve of public/private land in western Nebraska.

Reaction to the concept varies among the small pool of academics, policymakers and agency leaders who've seen the report, but most are intrigued by it. Bruce Johnson, an agricultural economy professor for UNL, called the idea "outside-the-box thinking" that could have practical applications.

"I think it represents some turns, some institutional twists, but it isn't denouncing our traditional mindset of private ownership," he said. "It asks where can we collaborate and continue to maintain our economic livelihood and at the same time enhance — there's the possibility of enhancing our economic livelihood — by capturing some of these environmental goods."

For those who would question the appeal of a large grassland area to eco-tourists, Johnson asked who ever thought the Sandhills would become a magnet for world-class golf courses? And who, 50 years ago, would have thought thousands of tourists would come to central Nebraska every spring to watch cranes migrate?

"We would be remiss to not significantly think of that as a resource to manage and steward and profit from," he said.

Mary Harding, executive director of the Nebraska Environmental Trust, said she finds the concept worthy of discussion and serious consideration.

But those living in rural communities and on farms and ranches also need to be a part of the discussion if they're going to trust supporters of the idea.

"It's going to take convincing them that this isn't social engineering and not something designed to move them out."

Reach Joe Duggan at 473-7239 or jduggan@journalstar.com.