



# Putting Conservation in the Hands of Voters

HOW THE MINNESOTA PRAIRIE PLAN IS PAYING OFF

By Greg Hoch



Credit: Jeff Straub

Minnesota's Prairie Plan aims to preserve and restore a functioning prairie system. These photos show before and after a tract of native prairie was plowed under on a property adjacent to Frenchman's Bluff Scientific and Natural Area in northwestern Minnesota. Although less than one percent of Minnesota's native prairie remains, acres are still being lost.



Credit: Jeff Straub

In 2008, near the bottom of the economic recession, the people of Minnesota voted to amend the state's constitution, creating a new tax that would provide increased funding to restore, protect and enhance the state's grasslands, wetlands and forests. The passage of the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment was heralded as a bold move by residents who imposed a three-eighths of one percent sales-and-use tax rate hike on themselves for 25 years in the name of cleaner water and healthier habitats. Today, seven years later, the tax has generated more than \$1 billion for conservation and other projects.

As more states face cuts to their habitat and wildlife programs, Minnesota's model offers some encouraging lessons on how citizens can help support their states' conservation efforts and protect rich outdoor traditions as well as how agencies and conservation organizations can work together effectively.

## Getting Started

Upon passage of the amendment, the state legislature established the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council to provide funding recommendations for the Outdoor Heritage Fund. This fund — one of four created by the amendment — receives one-third of the revenue generated by the tax.

The prairie pothole region in western Minnesota encompasses the eastern edge of the northern Great Plains. This expanse of tallgrass prairie and thousands of shallow wetlands was the state's greatest conservation need at the time and remains a top priority today. Almost 98 percent of the original prairie and wetlands in the region had been converted to agriculture, drastically reducing this important habitat for migratory waterfowl and other wildlife.

To coordinate restoration efforts, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) convened a series of meetings to gather input from the state's conservation agencies and NGOs. Represented at these meetings were a wide variety of conservation interests: the Minneso-



ta Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR); the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources; the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; the Natural Resources Conservation Service; Pheasants Forever; Ducks Unlimited; The Conservation Fund; the Audubon Society; and the Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society. Staff from each entity met monthly for more than a year to outline a strategic plan. The result was the [Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan](#), a roadmap for using the Legacy funding to preserve and restore a functioning prairie system in the most prudent manner possible.

### Picking a Target Area

A key part of the plan came from the Minnesota Biological Survey, which had identified 235,000 acres of the state's remaining tallgrass prairie. TNC scientists worked with state survey biologists to identify core areas in western Minnesota where large clusters of native prairie still remained. The USFWS' Habitat and Population Evaluation Team then modeled corridors connecting these core areas. Together, they identified 3- by 3-mile corridor complexes spaced along these corridor areas that would allow wildlife to travel from one core area to another. The team's goal was to maintain or increase the grassland areas — which are made up of a combination of state and federal wildlife areas, easements, pastures and hayfields, and lands enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and related Farm Bill programs — to at least 40 percent of the habitat within the core and corridor complexes.

Although the surrounding agricultural matrix was also in need of attention, these core and corridor areas became the focus of the team's conservation work as they offered the greatest opportunities to retain landscape-level ecosystem processes as well as viable populations of grassland-dependent wildlife species such as the greater prairie-chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*).

The Prairie Plan was formalized in July 2012 when all the partners signed a memorandum of understanding to coordinate their work across the prairie region. Since that time, the agencies and NGOs have continued to meet monthly to ensure that their joint efforts are effective.

### It's Working

In each of the last four years, partners have received between \$39 and \$48.6 million from the Outdoor



Credit: Walt Gessler/MNDNR

Heritage Fund. With these additional resources, MNDNR and USFWS have almost doubled their ability to protect acres by fee-title acquisition of public hunting lands in the form of state Wildlife Management Areas (WMA) and federal Waterfowl Production Areas (WPA). The number of acres enrolled in permanent conservation easements also has increased.

The Northern Tallgrass Prairie National Wildlife Refuge — encompassing all or part of 85 counties in western Minnesota and northwestern Iowa — is a prime example of these efforts. The Refuge's long-term goal is to protect 77,000 acres of primarily native prairie through conservation easements and fee-title acquisition. Legacy funding for the Refuge is one of the primary tools in the state for protecting tracts of remaining tallgrass prairie. MNDNR's Scientific and Natural Areas program — which pursues preservation of the best examples of native plant communities, habitat for rare and endangered species and other important activities — is another important part of protecting native prairie lands.

These funds also have allowed Minnesota to increase its management of grasslands. MNDNR now employs two roving crews in the prairie part of the state. These teams of six to eight people focus

MNDNR roving crews conduct prescribed fires to manage prairie landscape. With additional resources from Legacy funding, the agency has increased its capacity for activities such as this, tree removal, wetland management and fencing for conservation grazing on Minnesota's grasslands.





Credit: Greg Hoch

A National Wildlife Refuge sign marks a tract of Minnesota working land. Grassland conservation under The Prairie Plan includes integrating haying and grazing, when and where it is appropriate, to meet management objectives, such as in the Hamden Slough National Wildlife Refuge in western Minnesota.

entirely on management activities such as prescribed fire, tree removal, wetland management and fencing for conservation grazing.

To encourage other groups to get involved, MNDNR manages the Conservation Partners Legacy (CPL) grant program. Groups can submit proposals to conduct habitat management projects on state WMAs and federal WPAs. To date, the program has invested almost \$8 million in grassland habitat projects — an amount that does not include wetland projects, many of which are in the prairie region. Much of the money is used to employ private contractors that perform habitat work, which in turn helps support rural economies and small businesses.

Another effort is the Prairie Recovery Project developed by TNC. This program places TNC staff in MNDNR and USFWS offices to help agency staff work with local contractors, thereby increasing the capacity to get land management work done. All of these activities are considered new and additional to the work that always has been done by agency staff and allow them to manage far more acres of land.

## Monitoring Progress

One very important aspect of the Prairie Plan is monitoring areas to determine whether projects are achieving their goals. Teams are using a framework similar to that of USFWS' Strategic Habitat Conservation. The Grassland Monitoring Team — a coordinated effort among TNC, MNDNR, and USFWS biologists — developed a single protocol and common database where everyone can collect data in the same manner and large datasets from across the region can be analyzed at the end of each summer.

One common need across western Minnesota is determining which tracts of land are the most important to acquire or protect under easement or where habitat management projects should be focused. These decisions are made by local technical teams that have been set up for each core area or cluster of core areas. Staff from state and federal agencies — as well as local agencies such as Soil and Water Conservation Districts — meet regularly to discuss conservation decisions in each area and coordinate efforts among agencies and partners.

The local teams play a key role in delivering the conservation objectives outlined by The Prairie Plan. They also have fostered greater collaboration and communication among state, federal and conservation NGOs at the local level.

## A Living Plan

To help ensure that the tax funds are used prudently, stakeholders recognize that The Prairie Plan is a living document that must reflect the constantly fluctuating Minnesota landscape. Partners incorporate periodic changes to keep up with the changing landscape.

For example, the Energy Independence and Security Act dramatically increased the demand for corn-based ethanol in 2007, causing prices to soar. This set off a frenzy of sod-breaking and wetland drainage, the likes of which hadn't been seen for decades in the state. From 2007 – 2014, federal CRP acres in Minnesota declined from 1,454,000 to 799,000. At the same time, drainage tile permits in one watershed in west-central Minnesota increased from 374 to 2,675 miles per year from 2007 to 2012. By the spring of 2015, however, corn prices fell below production costs, which will likely cause a switch in corn planting volume this year. Such dramatic economic shifts



are very challenging to integrate into the ecological landscape recovery plan.

In addition to losing CRP and native prairie to corn, aggregate extraction of gravel and sand threatens many of Minnesota's remaining prairies. These lands were never plowed under because the soils were too dry, rocky or sandy. Unfortunately, it's very difficult to track these losses because the acres are not enrolled in a program such as CRP.

### Assessing the Next Steps

Partners are now reviewing the first years of the Prairie Plan, applying the lessons learned and making revisions. This review will be done every three to five years and will allow all the partners to respond in the best manner to an ever-changing prairie landscape and effectively integrate new information into the next generations of the plan.

In the future, the plan partners want to expand the working-lands approach to conservation by integrating grazing, haying and related activities into public and private land management. Working land conservation demonstrates how production agriculture can be integrated with habitat manage-

ment. In some areas of the state, this approach has helped with residents' acceptance of public wildlife lands in the agricultural landscape.

It's important to recognize the citizens of Minnesota, who, with their votes, decided that habitat, wildlife and the state's outdoor heritage were important enough to put their money behind these efforts. Accordingly, partners participating in The Prairie Plan take their responsibility in executing the conservation work very seriously.

So far, the efforts have been very successful. Minnesota is protecting, restoring and enhancing far more grassland acres than before the Legacy amendment was passed. We all look forward to a brighter future for Minnesota's grassland habitats and wildlife. ■



Greg Hoch, PhD, is the prairie habitat team supervisor for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. He is a past-president of the TWS Minnesota State Chapter.

## Relevant Education for Wildlife Professionals

American Public University understands your passion for solving complex environmental issues. That's why we offer dynamic and collaborative environmental sciences programs that are affordable and online. Our wildlife-focused programs include:

- M.S. in Environmental Policy & Management with Fish & Wildlife Management concentration
- B.S. in Environmental Science with Fish & Wildlife Management concentration which aligns with Associate Wildlife Biologist (AWB) certification
- Environmental Sustainability Graduate Certificate
- Fish & Wildlife Undergraduate and Graduate Certificates

Get started today at [StudyAtAPU.com/Wildlife](http://StudyAtAPU.com/Wildlife)



*We want you to make an informed decision about the university that's right for you. For more about our graduation rates, the median debt of students who completed each program, and other important information, visit [www.apu.edu/disclosure](http://www.apu.edu/disclosure).*

