

A bold plan to save the tallgrass



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In the Flint Hills of Kansas, the Z-Bar ranch includes 11,000 acres of virgin prairie shown in Strong City, Kan., Thursday, Oct. 3, 1996. The Z-Bar became the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve Friday, Oct. 4, with passage of the Parks Bill by Congress. It will be the state's first National Park.

As winter arrives, the Flint Hills are a majestic rolling brown expanse. Yet historically, what exists today is no more than an echo of what was once a vast inland ocean of tallgrass prairie. And, sadly, it's an echo that every year seems to fade a bit more.

The demise of the tallgrass — the prairie that spawned the breadbasket of the world, that fed this nation's growth and challenged its imagination — is an American tragedy.

So the recent announcement by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of the creation of the Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area should be of vital interest to Kansans, Midwesterners and Americans.

This effort to preserve 1.1 million acres of the largest remaining expanse of that prairie — an effort that leaves the land and management in private hands, with minor restrictions — also serves Kansas City's interests and must be applauded. But while the plan is in place, and funding has been identified, area members of Congress will have to lobby for it, and they must do so.

Just over a century ago, the tallgrass prairie poured out of Canada, through the Dakotas and down into Texas. To the east, it covered the land as far as Indiana. Its western edge was just past the Flint Hills. In all, it covered 140 million acres. Today, less than 4 percent remains, and 80 percent of that is in the Flint Hills.

If the tallgrass prairie was once an inland ocean, today it has dried out to the point where the remnants more resemble a smattering of farm ponds across the rest of the Midwest.

Protecting and preserving what is left matters. Beyond its historic importance to this region and nation, the tallgrass prairie is the most endangered major ecosystem on Earth, more endangered than rain forests, wetlands and coastlines.

Once this mix of more than 100 grasses — big bluestem and Indiangrass, wild rye, prairie brome and dropseed, as well as flowers with blooms the size of volleyballs — supported as many as 60 million American bison, tens of millions of elk, millions of deer and hundreds of millions of prairie chicken and quail, as well as the now extinct Carolina parakeets and passenger pigeons.

During an age when carbon emissions are seen as an increasingly dangerous threat, there is no better carbon trap than a tallgrass prairie, as the grasses feed on carbon, grabbing it from the air and storing it beneath the ground.

The new federal proposal would pay ranchers who have kept their land in tallgrass through the years — estimated to be 3.3 million acres — about a third of the market value of their land to keep it in tallgrass. The project details are being worked out, but it probably would ban tall buildings, energy windmills, water towers or other structures that would affect the horizon. Ranchers would be required to leave the land uncut.

These ranchers are generally on land that doesn't lend itself to crops, and they would be allowed to continue grazing cattle, preserving an important American lifestyle.

Mike Rich, the Legacy Conservation Area project leader, notes that the program is wholly voluntary. Fish and Wildlife would be buying permanent "conservation easements." The point is to help landowners whose prairie is still tallgrass to keep their land in tallgrass.

"We're getting five or six landowners a day stopping in to ask about getting involved," Rich said. "What we want to do is maintain the feel the original settlers must have had when they entered the area."

The area wouldn't be a park, though Wendy Lauritzen, the superintendent of the federal 11,000-acre Tallgrass Prairie Preserve near Cottonwood Falls, Kan., said she thinks it would enhance the park. To be truly appreciated, tallgrass prairie has to be vast, stretching to the horizon, and this program preserves that scope.

"Ideally, it would protect the approach to the park, and the view from inside it, for future generations," she said.

The funding for this important project is available, and not from standard tax coffers. The Land and Water Conservation Fund gets a portion of offshore drilling fees to use to protect land and water, up to a total of \$900 million a year. The Flint Hills proposal would require as much as \$400 million, but over 30 years. Without a share of such funding, the project could die this year. The money is available in the conservation fund, but Kansas' members in Congress will have to champion it.

Given that Kansas is woefully underrepresented in terms of national parks and federal land, this project represents a call they must take up. If this generation doesn't finally protect this vital American landscape, future generations might never know it at all.

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