

A NATIONAL TALLGRASS PRAIRIE PRESERVE?

MOTT, William Penn
Director, National Parks Service

SUMMARY

The National Parks Service is spearheading a movement to establish a significant preserve. Present attention is focused on the Osage Hills area. Many conflicting interests are being harmonized.

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to meet with you and discuss the efforts that are underway to preserve and manage those examples of prairie that remain from the once vast grasslands of this country. Also, I would like to congratulate each of you on the diverse and important activities that you are pursuing, both in grassland management and in assuring recognition of the need for quality prairie management.

It is with considerable interest that I noticed the theme of this conference to be "Roots of Our Culture; Foundation of our Economy." The rich history of the Texas grasslands is well known, along with the cultural history of settlement and use of the prairie. We also are aware of the history of land use of the grasslands throughout this country and the fact that very little true prairie remains. I commend the efforts of those, such as the Native Prairies Association of Texas, which are arousing public concern for the preservation of our prairie areas.

I have a long and deep interest in the protection of natural areas and the vital importance of maintaining an opportunity for natural diversity to continue. We are continually reminded of the many unknowns of nature and the importance that various species may have to mankind in the future. The many varied activities that you are involved with help to assure the presence of the prairie ecosystem and its past and future importance to our economy and history.

As many of you know, efforts have been underway since the 1930's to establish a tallgrass prairie park or preserve under federal government management. Many studies have been undertaken, most of which were directed by the National Park Service. National Park Service Studies were first prompted by a 1958 resolution by the Secretary of the Interior Advisory Board which recommended that grassland studies be pursued to identify "superlative areas" for inclusion as national monuments in the National Park System.

In 1958 and 1959, a survey of the tallgrass prairie region was conducted to identify areas suitable for inclusion in the National Park System. Sites ranging from the Canadian border to Texas were evaluated. Study areas had to be at least 30,000 acres to qualify for necessary resources management. A "typical prairie" site had to contain representative topography, drainage systems, and had to support representative vegetation and wildlife. The areas also had to contain diverse and scenic landforms.

The result of studies in the 1950's revealed that most typical and suitable sites were in the Flint Hills region of Kansas and Oklahoma. In 1960, the National Park Service issued a proposal for a 57,000 acre preserve to be established in Pottawatomie County, Kansas. Due to lack of broad public support and development conflicts, the proposal was not acted upon by Congress.

Other proposals and studies that have involved the tallgrass prairie preserve concept include the Great Plains/Prairie Tourway proposal, the Antelope Hills, North Dakota Study, and the Cherokee Strip Study.

The National Park System Plan published in 1972 identified the need and justification of a tallgrass prairie unit which would include important natural history and historic themes not represented in the National Park System.

The National Park Service undertook an analysis of potential sites for a Tallgrass Prairie National Park in 1974-1975, prompted by requests from the Kansas congressional delegation. This major study resulted in an environmental assessment alternatives study for a proposed Prairie National Park, Kansas/Oklahoma. This document was published as House Document No. 96-12, Part II in 1979. However, no specific legislative action resulted from this report from the Secretary of the Interior to Congress.

The desirability of establishing a tallgrass prairie preserve has been widely recognized. I have stated that a tallgrass prairie unit of the National Park System should be one of our highest priorities; it is needed to make the system representative of America's major natural features.

The current thrust to establish a prairie preserve is focused on the Osage Hills area of Oklahoma. Substantial national, state, and local public interest has developed for this preserve. Several local organizations, among them the Sierra Club and Audubon, are helping the Oklahoma Wildlife Federation and the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve Association from Pawhuska, Oklahoma, have taken the lead in pursuing legislative enactment. In 1985, Oklahoma Senator Don Nickles established a local task force group to evaluate the possibility of enacting a prairie park. In July 1985, the group responded favorably to Senator Nickles, who has supported some form of prairie park concept.

The Osage Hills area provides an outstanding opportunity for preserving a substantial area of prairie grassland much the same as it was prior to settlement of this county. The entire county is a reservation for the Osage Indians and all subsurface mineral rights are held in reserve by the Secretary of the Interior for the benefit of the Osage. The primary land uses of this area have been cattle ranching and oil production. Both industries are presently faced with economic difficulties and many are considering tourism as a new economy for the area.

The Osage will provide an ideal prairie preserve location to interpret to the visiting public the history of plains settlement, Indian relocation and policy, the cattle industry, oil and gas production

in the mid-continent oil fields, as well as the natural history of the prairie before and after human occupation.

The grasslands in the Osage Hills are in remarkable good condition, and the grass species and topography represent a very good example of a typical tallgrass prairie. With good resource management practices, the area will provide the opportunity for visitors to experience conditions much as would have existed during the settlement period.

We are currently pursuing a Prairie Preserve rather than a unit that would be managed as a National Park. Because of the need actively to manage the prairie, and the political interest in Oklahoma to continue oil and gas production, to reintroduce native ungulates, to provide hunting and fishing opportunities, as well as grazing and wildfire management, the preserve concept provides for the most feasible management approach.

Planning for this potential prairie preserve has required a flexible approach on the part of the National Park Service. Considerable difference of opinion exists over the most desirable size of a preserve. We have been operating according to the general objectives of Senator Nickles' Task Force Committee, which established a 50,000 acre Federal-fee ownership area as the maximum-size for acquisition. This size area may change as we progress toward legislation. The current proposal contains 132,000 acres surrounding the fee

acquisition area in which the National Park Service would acquire conservation easements.

There are several significant and controversial issues that have been debated during the formulation of a tentative proposal. Successful legislative action will require a proposal that provides for the continuation of oil and gas production within the preserve boundary. The mineral rights are held by the Osage tribe and the majority of the tribe's income is generated through oil and gas revenues.

The National Park Service has agreed that cattle grazing within the conservation easement area can be a part of the resources management program, while also introducing bison, elk and antelope in a fee area. Fire will also be used as a management tool.

While there may also be questions to answer regarding the future management of a prairie reserve unit of the National Park System, we are confident that we have the flexibility to deal successfully with the public concerns, and that we can formulate a management approach that will meet the needs of local and national interest, and the requirements of the National Park Service.

Again, I would like to commend you for the diverse efforts that each of you are pursuing. I feel that the results of your activities and programs will result in much needed opportunities for small and large areas of our once extensive prairie grassland to continue. We must provide for this opportunity.

