

PLANNING FOR AN OSAGE PRAIRIE NATIONAL PRESERVE

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The National Park Service has been providing technical assistance since the spring of 1985 to the Oklahoma Congressional delegation and a local prairie preserve committee to establish a prairie preserve unit of the national Park System in the Osage Hills of Oklahoma. Douglas Faris and Jack Linahan, Superintendent, Chickasaw National Recreational Area, have taken the lead in working with the Congressional delegation and with a local task force established by Senator Don Nickles in Pawhuska, Oklahoma. The focus of planning has been to formulate various boundary and management concepts, and to evaluate the task force's recommendations for operating a prairie preserve unit.

Establishing a tall grass prairie preserve has been under consideration since the early 1930s. Many studies have been undertaken, most of which were directed by the National Park Service. These studies were first prompted by a 1956 resolution by the Secretary of 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 tall grass 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 a least 30,000 acres to qualify for necessary resources management. A "typical prairie" site had to contain representative topography and 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 1950s revealed that the most typical and suitable sites were in the Flint Hills region of Kansas and Oklahoma. The present proposal by members of the Oklahoma Congressional delegation includes lands in the Osage Hills area of Osage County, 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 to development conflicts, the proposal was not acted upon by Congress.

Other proposals or studies involving the tallgrass 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 for a tallgrass prairie unit which would include important natural history and history themes not represented in the National Park System.

The National Park Service undertook an analysis of the potential sites for a Tallgrass Prairie National Park in 1974-75, prompted by request from the Kansas Congressional delegation. This major study by the National Park Service resulted in an Environmental Assessment/Alternative Study Areas for a Proposed Prairie National Park, Kansas/Oklahoma. This document was published as House Document No. 96-12, Park II in 1979. However no specific legislative action resulted from this report from the Secretary of the Interior to Congress.

The National Park Service study of 1974-1975 focused on three study areas that were determined to be most desirable for a prairie park or preserve. These areas were the Wabaunsee and Chase areas of Kansas and the Osage area in Oklahoma.

The Osage Hills study area has long been recognized as being an excellent example of a prairie area that meets the criteria for classical prairie and with relatively few human impacts. The study area is composed of several large ranches some of which are currently available for acquisition. The primary land uses have been ranching and oil and gas production. Both the ranching and oil economies are currently having difficulties and the time is good for acquisition. Several national environmental organizations have been working with local landowners and interested parties to encourage political action.

The present proposal for a tallgrass prairie preserve is a result of a report issued by a task force of Osage County residents formed by Senator Don Nickles in 1984. The report and proposal encourages the introduction of Federal legislation to establish the Osage Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in northern Osage County Oklahoma.

The task force has indicated that strong local support exists for establishing a preserve and that the National Park Service would be a good neighbor. The report indicates that Congressional, state and

local officials favor consideration by the Federal government to create a national preserve.

The task force presented to Senator Nickles a specific recommendation for establishing a preserve. The advisory group and local leaders have definite concepts of what should be included in the preserve and how management of the preserve should be undertaken.

MANAGEMENT CONCEPT AND ISSUES OF THE PRESENT PROPOSAL

Formulating and implementing the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve should be undertaken with full consideration of the concerns and valid rights of the local Osage Indian Tribe. All subsurface mineral interest is owned by the Osage Tribe and management of the preserve must comply with provision of Title 25, Park 226, code of Federal Regulations as it applies to the Osage Reservation lands. At issue is how the National Park Service would manage or control oil and gas exploration and development within the preserve? Could the National Park Service exercise control with Title 36, code of Federal Regulations, Subparts 9 A&B? This regulation requires specific plans of operation for each action. Can a preserve-wide management plan be undertaken with the Bureau of Indian Affairs that would reduce time and expense for oil and gas operators?

The present concept for the preserve includes two "core areas" and a surrounding "protection area." Substantial differences of opinion exist over the amount of land that would be included in these two areas. The core area would be acquired in fee. The protection area would be managed through conservation easements. The size and management practices in these two areas are at issue.

Resources management of the preserve is proposed to include grassland management by use of fire, controlled grazing, and other potential actions as well as hunting, trapping, and fishing. A very significant concern is the use of herbicides for control of the grasslands. Should any use of herbicides be permitted within the boundary of the preserve?

The degree to which a natural ecosystem similar to what existed prior to settlement by white man can be reestablished is a significant aspect of the present proposal. Introduction of once native animals, numbers, and management practices is at issue.

Visitor use and facility development are a concern. Task force representatives have suggested the Bluestem Lake should be included in the boundary and that recreational support facilities be developed by the National Park Service adjacent to the lake. Appropriate visitor use as well as location and type of facilities will require resolution. Some of these items can only be

resolved by a major planning analysis including required compliance.

Local government and advisory group representatives have proposed to provide preserve generated revenues to the local county government for tax revenues that will be lost as a result of Federal government acquisition of private ranch lands. A proposal that has some support is to use revenues from grazing leases to offset local government tax losses and/or to assist in operating the preserve.

The task force has proposed that the National Park Service assume responsibility for building and maintaining all roads within the preserve and all roads leading from major highways to the preserve. The question of a parkway/tourway has surfaced. Other road options include using existing roads with improvements as required

BOUNDARY AND MANAGEMENT CONCEPT

Several boundary and development concepts have been prepared with full consideration for the task force recommendations. The boundary concepts were based upon known resource data and characteristics of the Osage Hills area, the management concept of a preserve as presented by Senator Nickles; local task force, accepted management practices as included in previous studies, and general preserve sizes that have been identified by prairie experts as being necessary to maintain a representative example of tallgrass prairie.

- The following criteria were used as guidelines for making decisions on boundary questions. These criteria were identified during the major environmental analysis undertaken by the National Park Service in 1974-1975.

- A representative tallgrass prairie ecosystem illustrating characteristic topography, vegetation, drainage patterns, and wildlife.

- A tallgrass prairie community that is relatively stable, or in the process of succession to a natural condition, as demonstrated by a relative lack of disturbances and invader species, vigor of plant communities, and predominance of climax vegetation.

- An area that manifests the scenic attributes of the prairie - spaciousness, expansive grasslands, riparian woodlands, and rolling topography.

- A manageable unit that permits effective control and protection of resources, that encompasses either complete watersheds or headwaters, that encloses an area with more or less equal dimensions, and that lacks interruptive features.

- A site that can be adapted to provide numerous and diverse opportunities for

visitor enjoyment of natural, cultural, and scenic values within a natural tallgrass prairie setting.

- A land area that is relatively free of adverse man-made intrusions or disturbances.

The boundary concepts that have been prepared all include a "core area" concept surrounded by a "protection area." Lands in the core area would be acquired in fee and managed to preserve and reestablish a high quality segment of typical tallgrass prairie. Lands in the protection area would be protected and managed by conservation easements. The protection area lands would be managed to preserve scenic qualities and cultural and natural resources with continuation of ranching operations. Public use and some National Park Service facility development could be undertaken in both areas. Ranching practices and grassland management would be controlled by easement stipulations. Developments would be limited to those required for ranching purposes. Lands which may be acquired in fee because they are part of a specific core area ranch, but are located in the protection area, could be resold with deed restrictions to be managed as easement lands. Easement lands also could be bought in fee and resold with appropriate deed restrictions.

The boundary concept favored by Senator Nickles' task force is composed of two core units with a large surrounding protection zone. The two core units, which would be acquired in fee, comprise 45,132.44 acres of which 29,136.6 acres are in the northern unit and 15,999.7 acres are in the southern unit.

The protection zone includes 132,135.44 acres that would be managed by acquisition of conservation easements. All mineral rights within the proposed boundary would continue to be held in trust by the Department of the Interior for the benefit of the Osage Indian Tribe. The National Park Service would not acquire subsurface rights.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE EVALUATION

The boundary concept with core areas and surrounding easement zones will provide for a manageable national Park Service unit.

Two concerns with the current proposal have been identified. The Service would like the opportunity to acquire more lands in fee if major landowners choose to sell more fee interest rather than an easement interest. Also, because of the difficulties of Federal government enforcement of easement restrictions, a desirable option is to acquire property and sell it back to current owners with deed restrictions which provide for more control than normal easement limitations.

The preserve will need major facility development to provide for visitor use, interpretation, and recreational needs. Major facility developments would be focused toward the southern core unit and adjacent to services and major transportation corridors. Facility developments in the larger northern unit should be limited, with more emphasis on natural resource management.

Oil and gas production can continue within the preserve, managed according to existing regulations now used by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The Service would formulate a minerals management plan in cooperation with the Osage Tribe and the Bureau of Indian Affairs and would have on-site resource managers to observe drilling and production procedures.

Active management of the prairie grassland would be required. Rotational grazing and fire management would be used. A comprehensive resource management plan would be formulated following enactment of legislation. The Service has strict policies on the use of herbicides and would not want to use them for grassland management.

Some reintroduction of native ungulates would be undertaken on an experimental basis. Bison would be located in the southern core unit where they would be viewable by visitors.

The Service would prefer to use the existing road system where possible. Some new road linkages would be necessary with improvements to existing roads for visitor safety. The use of existing roads where feasible would help maintain the character of the area and would limit development damage.