

Park supporters celebrate plan for tallgrass preserve

By Chris Grez
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STRONG CITY — Officials who helped make the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve a reality celebrated the completion of a management plan for the park's future on Tuesday, surrounded by the lush green grass along the floodplain of Fox Creek — first on the list of areas to restore to native tallgrass.

The preserve, located in Chase County, is a unique public-private partnership like no other unit in the National Park System. The National Park Trust, a nonprofit land conservancy dedicated to preserving America's national parks, owns the land that makes up the preserve. But the National Park Service is responsible for managing the park.

For 30 months, the NPT and the NPS worked together to solicit public opinions and conduct historical research in an effort to create an outline that will direct how the park is developed and maintained, as well as what aspects of the preserve will be emphasized to visitors. The result, The General Management Plan, was officially dedicated Tuesday during a ceremony called "Partnership for the Prairie Celebration."

"This is a celebration of the General Management Plan, which has been an effort of blood, sweat and tears for a long time by a lot of you who are here," said Paul Duffendack, vice chairman of the NPT.

Paul Pritchard, the NPT's president and founder, who is based in Washington, D.C., discussed the preserve's history, beginning with the American Indians and pioneer settlers who were the first to enjoy its beauty.

Years later, after most of the tallgrass had been cleared for farming and ranching, advocates began talking about a way to preserve an element of the prairie. Area residents became involved in moving the process forward. The park service began looking into the ideas as numerous politicians threw their influence behind the project, most notably U.S.

Sen. Nancy Kassabaum, R-Kan.

In 1996, Congress passed legislation that officially made the park a unit of the National Park System dedicated to preserving and enhancing the tallgrass prairie.

"The threads that weave this park together are not just the unique ecosystem, but the people who have made it possible," Pritchard said. "Parks blossom because of the commitment of people."

Steve Miller, the preserve superintendent for the National Park Service, said 75,000 visitors have been to the park since it was established. He said he treats the management plan as his bible, and he looks forward to further developing the park.

"Although we're still at the beginning stages, we know so much more about the incredible stories that the tallgrass prairie has to tell," he said. "The possibilities are endless."

Also at the ceremony, Koch Industries was recognized for a significant donation that enabled the preserve to move forward with its management plans. Roger Ramseyer, who accepted a plaque on behalf of Koch, said company founder Fred Koch had a great passion for the tallgrass prairie.

"Today is a special day for all of us who are Kansans, and more importantly today is a special day for those of us who are Americans," Ramseyer said. "To have a national park of this caliber located right in the heart of our state is very exciting."

Bill Schenk, who is the NPS Midwest regional director based in Omaha, Neb., recalled his first visit to the area when he met with some area residents who were concerned about the federal government owning land in their backyards. Over time, many in the area have become supporters, and much progress has been made already at the preserve, he said. But much work lies ahead.

"You often hear about a cup being half full or half empty. I maintain it's still half a cup," Schenk said. "There's a long way to go."