Collaboration in the Flint Hills: A Conservation Success Story

By Anna Funk

What do you think would happen if you gathered representatives from federal and state agencies, university academics, representatives from large NGOs, and private ranchers, and asked them to determine how a globally rare habitat was going to be conserved—on the ranchers' land? In many places, it might be unproductive or at best slow and tedious. But in the Flint Hills of Kansas, this level of collaboration is not only happening, it's highly successful.

So opened Lisa Smith, Executive Director of the Natural Areas Association, as she introduced regional leaders from Kansas' Flint Hills for an October 10 panel discussion at the 2024 NAA Conference. The discussion, moderated by Rex Buchanan, Director Emeritus of the Kansas Geological Survey, highlighted a remarkable story of conservation on a landscape where nearly all of the remaining **tallgrass prairie is privately owned.** Here, trust, humility, and shared goals have transformed potential conflict into one of the most effective conservation models in the country.

From Conflict to Collaboration

In Kansas, private property rights are paramount. As Jane Koger, owner of Homestead Ranch, said with a laugh: "We all have a little cross-stitch in our house that says, 'This is my ranch, and I'll do as I damn please.'" What pleases Koger, as it were, is managing her land as an ecosystem. "Do you want a pasture or a prairie?" someone once asked her. "That was when I made the decision: I wanted a prairie. That shifted our view from just quarter pounders to greater prairie chickens."

This mindset shift—managing for both cattle and conservation—is a key theme in the Flint Hills' success. Ranchers and conservation professionals have learned that ecological and economic objectives are not mutually exclusive. Jon Beckmann of the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks (KDWP) explained that, in his role, "The first thing we do is listen to the landowner's objectives. It doesn't do any good to come in and say, 'We can't do this or that because of the prairie chickens.'"

Managing a prairie ecosystem isn't easy, and although assistance is available, ranchers have historically been wary of the government coming in to "help." But today, personal relationships and shared goals have built a foundation of trust that keeps everyone together. Now, ranchers work hand-in-hand with agencies like the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to address challenges like woody encroachment, invasive species, and drought resilience.

Andrew Davis, a cow-calf producer at the Davis Family Ranch and president of the Greenwood County Conservation District, highlighted the importance of humility and compassion in building these relationships for success: "Arrogance is the number one thing that will kill anything right off the bat," he said. "But luckily I can say everybody I've had a chance to work with has not been that way."

The community in the Flint Hills even seems to have a healthy attitude toward handling disagreements. Roger Wells, executive director of the Tallgrass Legacy Alliance (TLA), explained his group's "80-20 rule": "We focus on the 80% of issues we agree on and set aside the 20% we don't. That's what's held us together." Organizations like the TLA help sustain trust and shared goals through education and outreach programs.

Flexibility and Volunteerism

Strong intrapersonal relationships are only half the battle; there's still the question of how, logistically, to manage a tallgrass prairie. The best answer is perhaps an

acknowledgment that there is no answer. "Every ranch is different, every situation is different," said Mike Disney of USFWS. "Sometimes, it's an experiment. If something works, we keep doing it. If it doesn't, we shift."

A spirit of voluntary conservation has also been critical for the successes seen across this landscape. "Kansans will do almost anything you ask them to—and almost nothing you tell them to," quipped Buchanan. Ranchers step up because it's the right thing to do for their land, their families, and future generations.

"Getting involved to make the world a better place to live is just part of the territory," said Wells.

One way this conservation-minded community has worked to foster an attitude of volunteer conservation among their neighbors is by lifting up champions like Koger and Davis. Rancher-led programs host tours on ranches to showcase successful conservation practices. "Landowners see what their neighbors are accomplishing and say, 'I want to do that,'" said Disney.

For instance, Koger explained that it hasn't been an economic challenge to manage her ranch for prairie. Because of the partnerships available, she hasn't had to take money away from her beef operation to enhance her prairie, she said. "If it's good for the bird, it's good for the herd."

Likewise, Davis highlighted the benefits of conservation easements for preserving both ecological and economic integrity. "It's a home—for my family, for prairie chickens, for

our cattle. If one thrives, the other will thrive." By lifting up these leaders, the ideas spread organically through the community and inspire others to volunteer.

Lessons for the Future

Of course, challenges remain. Woody encroachment, invasive species, and economic pressures test even the strongest partnerships. "There will never be enough conservation dollars to do everything that we have to do," said David Kraft. Kraft runs the Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition, a nonprofit dedicated to improving Kansas' grazing lands through collaborative education and stewardship.

Yet the collaborative spirit of the Flint Hills continues to prevail. Their success offers lessons for conservation everywhere: humility, trust, and shared goals drive real impact. Yet, as Beckmann reminded the group, relationships require ongoing care: "Ownership changes, people retire. We have to reestablish relationships consistently, so landowners always know who they're working with."

Supporting future generations is also a priority, and many of these groups have education and outreach programs. TLA's Young and Beginning Rancher Program provides opportunities for learning and collaboration—without the pressure of family expectations. "It's almost tongue in cheek, but we have one rule: Dads and grandpas are not invited," said Wells. "It's been very successful."

Davis hopes the future of his ranch will fall to his daughters. It's never going to be easy, but, "my goal is to get the ranch to a state where it's manageable and doable and fun

for them," he said. "Because ultimately that's why they're going to stay in the business—because it's enjoyable."

Measuring Success

How do we know all this is working? Success is not just about acres restored, "it's about the relationships that make those acres possible," said Disney. Beckmann agreed, adding that the intact ecological communities of the Flint Hills are a testament to what collaboration can achieve. "Without these efforts, species like prairie chickens and pronghorn wouldn't exist here," he said.

Ultimately, the Flint Hills prove that conservation thrives when partnerships are built on trust, adaptability, and a shared love for the land. As Lisa Smith reflected, "The commitment of these landowners to both their livelihood and biodiversity is inspiring. This region shows us what's possible when people come together to make a difference."

The Flint Hills story is one of hope—a reminder that conservation is not only possible on private lands, but powerful when guided by collaboration, compassion, and community.