Purpose: What is this meeting all about?
The Department of Natural Resources is updating their plan for managing grasslands in Central Wisconsin for the benefit of the Greater Prairie Chicken and other grassland obligate species. However, we know that managing for wildlife is only one of the reasons that people work hard to keep healthy grasslands on the landscape in our area. As a result, there is growing interest from the WDNR in developing working relationships with the agricultural community to coordinate management of state and private lands in the future.

We asked a small group of local landowners, mostly farmers, to participate in 1 of 2 focus group meetings to provide their ideas for how to improve grassland management in the future.
Participants

- 2 Focus Groups:
  - Paul J. Olson Wildlife Area
  - Buena Vista Wildlife Area

- Were asked:
  - to share 2 hours of your time – provide input & allow others to speak.
  - to share knowledge about the current conditions of grasslands in your area.
  - to share ideas about how to maintain grasslands as part of this working landscape into the future.

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### Participants

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<td>Hunting / Lek Observation / Grazing &amp; Hay</td>
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<td>Grazing</td>
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Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area (CWGCA)
Overview
Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area (CWGCA)

- DNR approved in 2004
- Grassland protection project to meet needs of numerous grassland species
- Prairie chicken is “umbrella species”
- Goal, objectives, boundary centered around prairie chicken life history needs
CWGCA Objectives

- Establish more permanent grassland habitat, focus near prairie chicken leks
  - Land acquisition
  - Conservation easements
- Protect 4 “core” areas & “stepping stone” areas in between
- Maintain open, undeveloped landscape (agriculture as primary land use)
CWGCA Partnership

- Partnership Coordinator hired in 2005
- Coordinator Role:
  - Oversee stakeholder efforts to meet CWGCA goal/objectives
  - Promote & deliver grassland conservation programs
  - Examples: landowner workshops, pasture walks
Past Prairie Chicken Management Plans

• 1995-2004:
  – Increase habitat
  – Expand northern range
  – Maintain 1,000 bird minimum

• 2004-14:
  – Connect core properties with stepping stones
  – Increase genetic diversity (translocation)
  – Increase grassland habitat (acquisition, conservation programs)
Each participant will write down their response on a notecard to the following question:

**What is the 1 (for now only 1) most important thing that you want those developing future plans to know about grassland management in the CWGCA before you leave here today?**

Gather your ideas for improving grassland management in Central Wisconsin
“#1 Thing is management”:

The discussion focused on expanding the role of “local” landowners in managing state owned land. The group began by agreeing that the land needs to be worked to keep it in grass cover, and that WDNR needs to demonstrate some success in the PJO area to get community support for grassland efforts.

- **Suggestion:** Landowners leasing public land need a 10 year commitment if they are expected to invest in the properties.
- **Suggestion:** Need clarity on which parcels in the PJO area are best suited for Prairie Chicken habitat.
“Slow down and do a better {job} with land {holdings}”:

There seems to be a strong local perception that it’s time for the state to stop buying land in the Paul J. Olson area and more intensively manage existing public lands. {WDNR biologist} shared that there is a maximum (20%) of land that can be actively managed annually, which was responded to with discussion suggesting that landowners believe this is just too little and that locals expect management to move faster.

• **Suggestion:** Open up to cover cropping on state lands, explore a multi-year planning process for fields.
“Burning”:
The group seemed to like the potential for burning on private and public lands in the PJIO area to promote grass. They believe that there is a lot of local knowledge and resources that could be leveraged to support expanded use of this management tool in the future.
“That this is {an} intensive agricultural area for vegetable production and we need continued cooperation for drainage and roads. We need funding to help maintain them.”:

The discussion went several directions with the initial response from the rest of the group that vegetable production (and the associated high capacity wells) are creating soil conditions (drier, high pH) that aren’t well suited for growing grass and weeds are growing. The result, based on their experience, is that much of the public grassland is not well suited for Prairie Chicken habitat.

- **Main topic:** Road and drainage ditch upkeep is essential.
“Short {Land} Tenure”:

The current leases offered on public lands are too short and the land being offered is too poor to attract attention from the producers willing to put the work in to see results that will improve the quality of grasslands. One producer stated that he is willing to travel a lot further to lease land (away from BV) simply based on the quality of what is available. Cattle grazing was suggested as a solution to the poor grassland quality – suggesting that money can be made, plus improvement for the Prairie Chicken.

• **Suggestion:** Need a structured plan specifically for grass management on public lands, including longer term leases.
“A large part of the area is not good \{Prairie Chicken\} habitat”:

Building up on the previous 2 points this discussion reinforced the poor quality of existing grass on public lands, suggesting that tall grass and weeds that they currently see there can’t be good for the Prairie Chicken. Additionally, they see burned areas and grazed / hay fields as good habitat.
There is a lot of land going to waste not utilizing it as grassland. The prairie chickens and cattle can definitely coexist together. They have done it for years."

This discussion seemed to suggest that a large percentage of the public land is going to waste and that this “idle” land could be used for production. However, it was also stated that they recognize that not all of the public land is farmable. We also heard additional call for a long-term plan for grass management.

- **Suggestion:** If possible, can land swaps be arranged to better align production and habitat needs on the landscape.
Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area (CWGCA)
Overview
CLUE: Megatrends

Total Cropland
10.1 Million Acres
(~25% pasture)

Urban Conversion
22,000 acres / year lost

Pasture to Corn
>100,000 acres / year

Wisconsin Cropland
This map shows the percent of total land cover in each county classified as cropland. The table below shows farmland use by acreage and selected crops by harvested acreage.

See Figure 1 on the front cover for a more detailed view of Wisconsin cropland.
Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area

The Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area
> 1,500 sq. miles.
> Generally encompasses remaining Greater Prairie Chicken habitat

Greater Prairie Chickens
- 30 year Steady decline
- 75% decrease from 1991
- 90% booming males reside on 4 major wildlife areas
This question provoked a strong response at both meetings as there was agreement from both focus groups that there is less grass today than there has been in the past. Trends driving these changes were described as larger scale agriculture, marginal land being recruited into production, and in the Paul J. Olson area landowners reported an increase in the number of trees.
Gather your ideas for improving grassland management in Central Wisconsin

**RESULTS**

- **CARD #2:** (Opinion) Do landowners in the area see value in maintaining and preserving grasslands in central WI?

  **Paul J. Olson**

  It became clear that consistent with the landscape change reported in the previous question that landowners values toward grasslands are shifting as well. It was suggested that grazing is seen as too much work for the next generation, while pressure from larger farm systems is also making this lifestyle unattainable. The suggestion that fewer people really see grasslands as important today than in the past was offered by participants at both focus groups.
The perceived benefits of grassland habitat varied by individual, but broad themes of potential economic opportunity, hunting or wildlife viewing access, improving the land or protecting water quality, and maintaining a healthy livestock industry. The last point was emphasized by a vegetable producer who suggested that cattle in the area complicate his business (e-coli risk), but even though he sees no direct benefit he still values these producers being on the land – after all he “loves red meat for dinner”.

- **Rental Income (Grazing)**
  - Pays well
  - Improves the land
- **Building Soil**
- **Wildlife, Hunting**
- **Benefits Bottom Line**
- **Water Quality, ↓ Erosion**

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**CARD #3:** (Goals) How can healthy grassland habitat (on public or private land) benefit you?

P A U L  J.  O L S O N

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**BUENA VISTA**
What do you feel are the causes of declining numbers of prairie chicken and other grassland obligate species over the past 20-30 years?

**Paul J. Olson**

- Method of Farming
  - Cut Hay Every 20 Days
  - Don’t Mow Growing Grain—Use Removal Fencerows Forward
- GT: C Genetics
- Land Management on Public Lands
- Lack of Advocates in Madison

**Buena Vista**

- Quality of Grains Has Declined
  - Inc. Weeds → Lack of Grazing
- Lack of Predator Control — Coyotes

The 2 focus groups differed somewhat in their response to this question with those near Buena Vista pointing to the decline in the quality of grass (and growing more weeds) as bad for farmers and Prairie Chicken alike. In the Paul J. Olson group the discussion included changing farming practices (hay cut intervals, fencerow removal, grain used for forage), along with concerns about the lack of management on public lands and their perception that there aren’t advocates in Madison (state government).
Prairie Chicken Management
Call to Action

Goals: 2004-2014 GPC Management Plan

1. “…a critical component of this project… work creatively with the farming community… to develop agreements that mutually benefit the economic health of farms and the ecological needs of grassland species”

Plan acknowledges the critical role of capacity building with landowners, but for many this was not the lived experience.
Prairie Chicken Lifecycle & Private Land

- **Booming (breeding) grounds**
  - Require short vegetation, open
  - Some located on private lands

- **Nesting habitat**
  - Undisturbed grass within close proximity of booming grounds
  - Mostly on state managed grasslands, sometimes on private land
Prairie Chicken Lifecycle & Private Land

- **Brood rearing habitat**
  - Recently disturbed
  - Presence of flowers, insects
  - Pasture & hayfields can provide

- **Managed grazing**
  - Maintain open landscape
  - Positive insect response

- **Hay harvest**
  - Invasive species control
Prairie Chicken Lifecycle & Private Land

- Corn, small grain fields (sunflower, oats, wheat, sorghum) provide:
  - Food source in late fall/winter
  - Invasive species control

- Scattered shrubs provide:
  - Night roosting habitat, severe weather protection
  - Source of food (buds, seeds, berries)
What are you currently doing on your land that you believe is a benefit to grassland dependent wildlife?

Many ideas were recommended as ways that agricultural producers are currently benefitting Prairie Chickens including side-effects from production, such as simply being a grassland (or grass-milk) farmer, to predator control, and grazing practices that help keep pastures weed-free. Other more direct action was also discussed, including: leaving residual when mowing, providing public education about grasslands, and leaving crops on the fields.
Responses differed between the focus groups with:

- **Paul J. Olson area landowners** focused on how to recruit more producers, make it easier for existing producers in the area to farm more grass – either on public or private lands.
- **Buena Vista area landowners** wanted access to public land for grazing (long-term agreements) and / or working on wind breaks or irrigated corners to provide habitat.

(Involvement) **What do you see as possible ways that landowners could support preserving additional grassland habitat in central Wisconsin?**
(Cooperative Management) **Are there ways that private landowners can help WDNR better manage public lands for the benefit of grassland dependent wildlife?**

Much of the discussion on this question became about how to implement longer term agreements with local producers. A minimum lease agreement of 10 years and at least 40 acres (although one participant in the Buena Vista focus group suggested 320 acres is the minimum needed to recruit him to work public lands) can help put idle lands back into production, while also asking these producers to serve as managers of those lands for multiple benefits (including wildlife). They also discussed a need to allow producers to make more management decisions, such as determining rotation within some established WDNR framework – but not being committed to a predetermined year by year schedule.
(Next Steps) What would need to happen next to move forward with some of the strategies identified in the 2 previous questions?

Responses to this question varied based on the emphasis of the different focus group discussions with:

- Paul J. Olson area landowners talking primarily about how to recruit more producers to participate in grass-based farming systems – although they also stated firmly that the emphasis must move away from a focus on protecting the Greater Prairie Chicken.
- Buena Vista area landowners focused on making land available and changing WDNR rules to do so – they also suggested that intensive or rotational grazing will not work in their area.
Prairie Chicken Management Plan
Current Prairie Chicken Management Plan Background

• Planning team consists of several DNR programs; external reviewers (stakeholder groups)

• What will be included in the plan?
  • Background
  • Status/Life History
  • Conservation/Management
    • Prairie chicken recovery criteria
    • Habitat management goals/objectives
    • Monitoring/research
    • Cost estimates
Prairie Chicken Management Plan

Tentative Timeline

• Develop plan (*Feb. 2016 – early 2017*)
  • Write background/status information
  • Develop management scenarios, test in models
  • Develop recovery criteria

• Public involvement
  • Targeted landowner outreach (*today*)
  • Public scoping meetings (*winter 2017*)

• Complete full plan draft (*spring 2017*)

• Final public review process (*summer 2017*)

• Natural Resources Board approval (*fall 2017*)
The discussion at both meetings focused on how the current arrangement of 1-3 year leases provides little incentive for producers to invest in public lands. They want to help improve these lands, but a **10 year minimum commitment** with benefits for those who achieve specific performance goals was highlighted by both focus groups.

- Performance goals were discussed in both group and generally represent some form of benchmark for improved grassland quality. There was significant input that the reduction of “weeds” be one of those indicators in the Buena Vista landscape, but this was really just a side note to their main point that improved grass for forage and habitat are achievable with a longer term commitment to producers as part of the management solution on public lands.

- If performance goals are being achieved and the quality of the grassland has improved over a set period of time (such as a 10 years contract) they suggested that some benefit should be retained by the producer. This wasn’t clearly defined as a non-competitive contract extension (as fair bidding was discussed), but possibly some form of “preferred” status to gain access to additional acreage just beginning a renewal management process.
Key Findings

2. A bigger role for local producers, with flexibility for high performers

The **willingness of local producers** to participate in efforts to preserve existing grassland / expand acreage of habitat came through clearly from participants in both groups. However, they also are seeking flexibilities – pointing to the fact that they have to call WDNR too often for permission on leased public lands, those actively supporting WDNR goals requested accountability on a longer time horizon.

- The value of grasslands to local landowners was discussed as a standard question in both focus groups. Each group suggested that the trend is toward less value being placed on intact grasslands by their respective communities. However, it was clear that there is a small, committed minority (including the focus group participants) that are passionate about grassland and more than one individual described as a lifestyle tied to grass-based farming. These individuals also asked for a greater level of involvement in the management of grasslands in Central Wisconsin, suggesting that they have local knowledge from trying different practices, some understanding of the needs of multiple species (including the Prairie Chicken), and access to others within their community willing to help get the job done.
A partnership approach needs to be taken to develop a workable, lasting long-term plan for grass management in Central Wisconsin. The focus needs to not be on a specific species, but rather on the multiple benefits of grassland habitat and the opportunity for grass-based agriculture to serve as a community and economic development focus in the area.

- The emphasis was clear from both groups that continued efforts to promote grassland habitat for the Greater Prairie Chicken are unlikely to attract broad support from landowners. This was reinforced by reports of “never seeing these birds” on public lands to suggestions that land acquisition by WDNR in the past for habitat is still a raw issue for many locals.

- What was clearly communicated by those that participated is that they see healthy grasslands as critical to their business interests, their enjoyment of this landscape, and to the long-term health of their communities. Support was suggested for a shift toward a broader set of goals (water quality, economic development, quality of working lands, etc.) in the CWGCA that could lead to preservation of existing and the potential for increased grasslands.
Concluding Observations

Recruiting Participation / Working with Producers

Paul J. Olson Wildlife Area

The concerns from producers at this meeting were about grass conditions and access, but also about the economics of grass-milk operations as recent prices are placing strain on local producers. Will there be enough producers on the landscape in the future to keep successional forests from reclaiming the open grasslands seemed to be an underlying concern.

- **Reaching landowners:** This group seems motivated by opportunities to support a partnership that can promote, build infrastructure to sustain, or recruit new grass-based agriculture in the area. Working through existing organizations (such as GrassWorks) may be one such pathway for connection.

Buena Vista Wildlife Area

This group shared that there is some tension between production systems either based on USDA standards (e-coli risk to crops from nearby grazing) or potential groundwater impacts on grass quality from high capacity wells. However, overwhelmingly they see room for a grass-based partnership to look at long term plans for this landscape.

- **Reaching Landowners:** Participants suggested a much more comprehensive outreach process (direct mailings to each producer in the area) may improve short-term communication. They also suggested that local discussion regarding drainage ditch and road maintenance may be another avenue for building support for grassland improvement.
Acknowledgements

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Suggested Citation


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