

New partnerships boost Flint Hills preservation

Article by Lynn Byczynski, Kansas Land Trust, Summer 2006 newsletter, www.klt.org

In just nine months – nine frenetically busy months – the Kansas Land Trust has forged new partnerships with federal agencies, pioneered innovative funding, and won unprecedented support from the Kansas Legislature. As a result, KLT is positioned to protect large parcels of land in the Flint Hills by purchasing conservation easements from willing landowners.

The backstory for this past year's activity really begins in 2002, when federal funding for purchasing conservation easements first became available to Kansas. The first three years, the money went unclaimed. Although there may have been landowners interested in selling conservation easements, there was no money for the required 25% local match. Altogether, \$1.8 million that could have been used for land conservation in Kansas was returned to USDA's Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program.

The Kansas Land Trust made a leap of faith when it submitted its first proposal for FRPP funds. KLT turned to its members for the matching funds – and members came through, donating the \$41,000 needed to win \$82,000 in federal FRPP funds. With that money, and a \$61,000 donation by the landowners, KLT was able to purchase the development rights on a 200-acre tract of tallgrass prairie in Riley County north of Manhattan.

That initial investment by members provided the impetus for more conservation easements in Kansas. Two years later, KLT won approval for FRPP funding for a 500-acre Flint Hills ranch, and this time, the Kansas Legislature provided the matching money.



Gray Adams, son of John and Sheri Adams, walks on his family's land near Tuttle Creek Reservoir. KLT has secured funding for a purchased conservation easement on the 770-acre property. Photo by Carolyn Young

“Other states have been bringing these federal funds into their economies and using them to protect land for many years,” said KLT President Bev Worster. “It’s taken us this long to bring some of that federal money to Kansas. KLT did it, and we did it because our members stepped up to the plate.”

Now KLT has entered a new era of Flint Hills preservation, using yet another source of federal funds to purchase conservation easements – a Department of Defense program known as the Army Compatible Use Buffer (ACUB) program. ACUB provides money to purchase conservation easements on land surrounding Army installations,

which otherwise might be developed for housing and other uses that are incompatible with military training. Between 2003 and 2006 Congress has already appropriated over 57 million dollars for the buffer program nationwide, and funding is expected to continue.

At Fort Riley, the Army identified a 50,000-acre buffer area that it hopes to keep as open space and agricultural land, primarily to prevent complaints about noise from training exercises and helicopters. As it turns out, about half the land in the Fort Riley buffer zone is native prairie, and half is prime agricultural land – exactly the kind of land the FRPP is designed to protect. It also fits squarely within the KLT mission.

No other land trust had ever used the Army money as the match for the FRPP money, so KLT Executive Director RoxAnne Miller took the idea to Harold Klaege, state conservationist with the Natural Resource Conservation Service, which administers the FRPP. He cleared it with his agency, and gave KLT the go-ahead.

“Some of this land needs to be protected, and this is one of the tools that can be used,” Klaege said. “It’s a good partnership.”

In the meantime, KLT began working to let landowners around Fort Riley know about the program. After hearing about the push to purchase conservation easements, 52 landowners contacted KLT to express interest, and KLT selected seven parcels for the first phase of the project and hired appraisers to determine their value.

Working against a tight deadline, KLT staff submitted a proposal and in May won approval of \$246,000 in FRPP funds and \$750,000 from the Army. Because of the success of the multi-agency strategy, Miller has been asked to speak about it at the National Land Conservation Conference in Nashville in October.

The total funds KLT received was less than requested, but that doesn’t discourage Miller. “Although Kansas’ requests will exceed the amount granted for the year, there may be a chance to get year-end FRPP funds that are turned back by other states. In any case, we have sent a clear signal that Kansas is ready for a higher allocation next year,” she said.

While working with landowners, Miller also spent time with various legislative committees, testifying six times about how land conservation can benefit the state.

“Fort Riley is one of the largest economic engines in the state,” she said. “The state clearly has an interest in ensuring that the Army can continue its training mission on its land and in promoting compatibility with neighboring agricultural land.”

The Legislature appropriated \$311,000 to help with the easement purchase program. It was nearly 10 times the amount appropriated for easements the previous year.

With that final piece falling into place, KLT is now positioned to move forward with preserving the state’s ecological jewel, the tallgrass prairie of the Flint Hills.

“This is a huge leap forward for our organization,” President Bev Worster said. “We have the potential to dramatically increase the number of easements we have done in the past.”

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For more information is available about FRPP on the Kansas NRCS Web site at www.ks.usda.gov/programs/frpp.