

# LOESS HILLS, *Iowa*

GREAT PLAINS FLN

650,000 ACRES



Wanamaker fire © Matt Graeve/TNC

**T**HE LOESS HILLS REGION, created by exceptionally thick deposits of windblown silt known as loess, harbors much of Iowa's remnant prairie and extensive areas of bur oak woodland. This area provides habitat for over 49 grassland species of special concern including the Regal Fritillary butterfly and birds such as the bobolink and dickcissel. It is home to Iowa's only known population of prairie rattlesnakes and provides habitat for reptiles such as the ornate box turtle and Great Plains skink.

#### COLLABORATIVE OBJECTIVES:

- Restore the ecological integrity of the prairie and oak woodland communities through the use of prescribed fire, mechanical brush control and planting local ecotype prairie seed
- Restore the prairie and oak woodland communities to improve the region for livestock production and other sustainable uses
- Reconstruct prairie on former cropland and cool season pastures.
- Develop a community of informed citizens and landowners who work to restore and maintain native systems

Historically the area was periodically swept by lightning-ignited fires and grazed by bison and elk, which helped keep Iowa's prairies healthy. Today the natural role of fire has been significantly altered, resulting in accelerated woody encroachment into grasslands and a decline in the regeneration of oak woodland. This alteration, coupled with increased residential development and incompatible land use, threatens to harm the area's fragile natural areas. With over 95 percent of the landform privately owned, restoration must involve the landowners.

#### COLLABORATIVE VISION STATEMENT:

The partnership will restore and maintain viable ecological communities, provide protection from unwanted wildland fire and improve productivity and value of the land through implementation of a regional fire management plan.

**THE SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE OF THE TOOLS** needed to achieve healthy prairies varies by locality and subculture. Acceptance of prescribed fire and grassland restoration can be accelerated by creating jobs in rural communities. Tree shearers, fire crew professionals and native seed producers can enable compatible economic uses in areas like livestock grazing and native seed production. As citizens' knowledge of local natural communities increases, native species benefit and the stocking rate for livestock producers can improve. Through collaboration, partners will find compatible activities that meet the ecological and economic needs of both natural areas and landowners. Additionally, a state-wide fire policy can improve the training of agency personnel who conduct prescribed burning.

The Loess Hills landscape has participated in the U.S. Fire Learning Network since 2002. The collaboration has leveraged state and federal funding sources to establish fire equipment caches throughout the landform, supported a private lands mobile fire crew and completed intensive outreach to over 200 landowners and the media on prescribed fire. The burn crew project continues to rely on local on-call crew members, an approach that is building a cadre of experienced fire practitioners in the region. Future plans include exploring new partnerships with the Bureau of Indian Affairs and others to share resources and supporting the development of volunteer fire department burn cooperatives.



Pre-burn review for the Folsom Point burn © Susanne Hickey/TNC

**PARTNERS:**

- Agren, Inc.
- Golden Hills Resource Conservation and Development Council (RC&D)
- Iowa Department of Natural Resources
- Iowa State University
- National Park Service
- Natural Resources Conservation Service
- Pheasants Forever
- Pottawattamie County Conservation Board
- The Nature Conservancy
- University of Nebraska at Omaha
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

**CRITICAL PARTNERSHIP FUNDING NEEDS:**

- \$200,000 to establish a comprehensive monitoring program
- \$120,000 per year to fund three private lands conservationists
- \$100,000 annually for cost-share restoration assistance to landowners

**KEY SUCCESSES**

The partnership completed a **REGIONAL FIRE MANAGEMENT PLAN** prioritizing actions needed.

**PRIVATE LANDS COST-SHARE ASSISTANCE INITIATIVE** was established, which has enrolled over 8,000 acres in restoration activities including brush management and prescribed fire.

Through **COMPREHENSIVE OUTREACH**, landowner interest increased with over 200 area individuals participating in workshops to date.

**THE REGIONAL MOBILE FIRE CREW** treated more than 1,500 acres and assisted partners with over 3,500 acres of fire.

By using Network-hosted **TRAINING** the Smithland Volunteer Fire Department is now burning approximately 600 acres annually within their township.

**2008–2009 PLANNED ACTIONS**

- Establish a comprehensive region-wide monitoring program that is integrated with Iowa's State Wildlife Action Plan.
- Maintain support for private lands outreach through funding of positions with the local Soil and Water Conservation Districts.
- Continue volunteer fire department training using National Wildfire Coordinating Group standards and other hands-on experience so they can better assist landowners with prescribed fire activities.
- Continue support for mobile fire crew activities on private lands in cooperation with Pheasants Forever.
- Expand collaboration and cooperation through development of brochures, workshops and one-on-one meetings.

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