

AMERICAN PRAIRIE CORRIDOR

Organizational Narrative

American Prairie Corridor (APCORR) was incorporated in Dallas, Texas as a 501(c)3 non-profit corporation in January 2018. The origin of APCORR was the result of three individuals coming together to discuss the extensive decline in pollinator species, prairie bird species, and native grassland habitat throughout the Great Plains. Although prairie restoration projects have been ongoing throughout the Great Plains for more than 30 years, it was immediately apparent from our review of scientific journals and discussion that the current rates of prairie restoration was having little effect on the broad decline of most prairies species. We decided that a more aggressive approach to prairie restoration and an order of magnitude increase in the conceptual thinking of prairie restoration was required to reverse these alarming species declines. The result of these early meetings was the formulation of the concept that a continuous, linked, restored prairie habitat across the Great Plains may be a requirement for the continued existence of many prairies species.

The concept of large grassland preserves in the Great Plains is not a new idea and was first articulated as a National Park by Catlin in 1843 (Catlin (1844) and again almost 100 years later as a National Monument by Cahalane (1940), conceptualized as a 'Bison commons' by Popper and Popper in 1987 (Popper and Popper 1994) as summarized in Matthews (1992), hypothesized as 'ecoreserves' by Licht (1997:160-176), presented as historical missed opportunities by Flores (2003:219-254), and most recently incorporated on his own ranch by O'Brien (2014) and many other ranchers and Indian tribes.

American Prairie Corridor is currently comprised of three board members: Charles Neel (Archaeologist), President; Tina Rush (Archaeologist and GIS Planner), Vice President and Treasurer; and Greg Tonian (Texas Master Naturalist), Secretary. Additional board members are expected to be added to increase the expertise of the board in diverse areas of ecological restoration and management. In addition to new board members, APCORR long range plans include a 12 member volunteer advisory board comprised of residents of Plains states with distinction in the fields of history, economics, poetry, biology, ornithology, archaeology, anthropology, botany, ecological restoration, ranching, farming, and writing.

American Prairie Corridor Concept

The concept for APCORR that was agreed upon at these initial planning sessions was a commitment to the development of a continuous 3-mile-wide corridor of restored prairie extending from the Mexico border in Texas to the Canadian border in North Dakota. The proposed corridor is 1,476 miles long, 3 miles wide, and comprises 2.7 million acres. This extensive undertaking is in line with the *Draft Mid-America Monarch Conservation Strategy 2018-2038* (MAFWA 2018) which identifies "a preliminary goal of restoration and enhancement of 7 million acres of pollinator friendly habitat nationally by 2020." This milestone is less than 2 years away. A pathway for the corridor project considered most feasible for acquisition was selected based on the following criteria:

- bypassing high population centers (i.e. west of the Tallgrass Prairie)
- inclusion of the area of most diverse prairie habitat (i.e. east of the Short Grass Prairie)
- selection of a north-south corridor in as straight a line as possible

- bounded on the eastern side by a roadway that may later be designated as a Scenic Prairie Highway

These criteria resulted in the selection of the historic Mixed Grass Prairie ecosystem region extending through the western portions of six states: Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota. The southern, approximately 200 miles, or 14% of the proposed corridor, falls within the Oak Savannah or Mesquite Savanna ecosystems. The remaining 86% has been classified as true Mixed Grass Prairie.

The entire Texas and Oklahoma portions of the proposed APCORR route lies within the *South Core of the Monarch Butterfly Conservation Units in the United States* with the remainder of the corridor route states of Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota extending through the *North Exterior Unit of the North Core* as defined by the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) as presented in MAFWA (2018:22).

Population Dynamics of the Great Plains

The proposed corridor eastern boundary has been established as following various highways and will extend through 6 states, 54 counties, and 75 cities, towns, and villages. The current census of these 75 population centers is 120,259 in the census estimate for 2016 and these population centers have shown a continuous decline of 9% for the previous 36 years since the census of 1980. Nine county seats out of the 75 population centers along the proposed corridor highway route account for 64% of this population. Most of the smaller towns and villages have shown continuous population declines since reaching a peak in the census of 1930. Indeed, only four of the 75 population centers (5%) along the proposed corridor highway have shown a continuous population increase since settlement in 1910 or prior. There has been a documented net population loss of 1% of the population every 4 years for this portion of the Mixed Grass Prairie region since 1980 (USCB 2018).

As this area has always been an agriculturally based economy since settlement by European-Americans, this net population loss can be attributed to several factors: depletion of soil fertility due to 100 to 150 years of agricultural practices, marginal rainfall patterns for row crop agriculture west of the 98th Meridian, farm consolidation and increased acreage per farm requiring less manpower, declining commodity market prices, decline and abandonment of railroad corridors, conversion of row crop agriculture to grassland ranching concomitant with soil organic depletion, mechanization of agriculture since WWII, and the lack of jobs in area population centers.

A secondary goal of APCORR is the establishment of ecotourism as a viable means for job growth, population stability and/or growth, and realignment of the economy to a viable market approach to Great Plains settlement not associated with federal tax support of agricultural and ranching activities of marginal and depleted farm and rangeland. Additional in-depth information of population dynamics and decline in Great Plains counties can be found in Licht (1997:105-117). In his survey, 228 (36%) of the 625 Great Plains counties had a population density of less than six persons per square mile and can now be defined as *frontier* in census data (Licht 1997:106). This *frontier* comprises an area almost the size of Alaska. More strikingly, 68 of these counties contain a population density of less than two persons per square mile and would have been defined as *wilderness* in the 1890 census (Licht 1997:107).

APCORR Phase I Goal: 5,400 acres restored habitat

Initial land costs:	\$11,570,000
Initial restoration costs:	\$3,510,000
Initial total costs:	\$15,080,000

The Phase I goal of APCORR is the acquisition and restoration of 100, preferably contiguous acres in each of the 54 counties of the proposed corridor and the designation of the American Prairie Scenic Highway which forms the eastern boundary of the proposed corridor route. This would result in the restoration of 5,400 acres along the corridor route as waystations for migratory prairie bird and pollinator species. Based on the size of the counties, each of these 100 acre waystations would be approximately 30 miles apart. The waystations would be continuously managed and monitored.

APCORR Phase II Goal: 9,300 acres restored habitat

The Phase II goal of APCORR is the acquisition and restoration of 100, preferably contiguous, acres at not greater than 10-mile intervals throughout the length of the proposed corridor. This would require the establishment of an additional one to four waystations of 100 acres each between each of the initial 54 waystations established under the Phase I goal. This would result in the restoration of an additional 93 waystations of 9,300 acres along the corridor route for migratory prairie bird and pollinator species for a total goal of 147 100-acre waystations of restored prairie habitat, or 14,700 acres at the completion of Phase II. The waystations would be continuously managed and monitored.

APCORR Phase III Goal: 2.7 million acres restored habitat + 54 crew houses

The Phase III goal is the acquisition and infill of the remaining acreage within the proposed designated 3-mile-wide corridor as land and funding become available. This infill will require the acquisition of an additional 2,685,300 acres for prairie restoration. All acreage would be continuously managed and monitored. Managing and monitoring of lands acquired will be performed by restoration specialists that will live and work within the community. When lands are acquired all fences and structures of the built environment will be removed. In some instances, when a property is acquired that contains an intact completely preserved historic farm of residence, barn, and outbuilding that represent a significant period of settlement history, this farmstead will be preserved as a local crew house headquarters. It is anticipated that one crew house will be required for each county of the corridor (n=54).

APCORR Financial Feasibility Assessment

The APCORR goal of acquiring and restoring 2.7 million acres of prairie habitat may seem daunting or perhaps even impossible at first view, however we believe the goal is not only possible but achievable within a ~10-20 year time span. As mentioned above, the MAFWA Draft alone identifies a restoration goal of 7 million acres within the next two years for Monarch butterfly habitat alone (MAFWA 2018:7). Although the proposed corridor acreage will be acquired by purchase, conservation easement, life estate, donation, and other means as applicable, some land parcels may never be acquired simply because the landowner will never sell (APCORR unilaterally rejects the use of eminent domain to acquire any property). However, for purposes of this financial review, we assume a worse case scenario of a

100% purchase cost of \$5.81 billion dollars (USDA 2018) if all 2.7 million acres of land within the corridor is purchased by fee simple title.

The population of the United States as of the 2010 census was 308.74 million persons (USCB 2018). Assuming an equal contribution by each person in the United States, it would require a contribution of only \$18.85 per person to acquire the 2.7 million acres of corridor lands by cash purchase. For less than \$20 each per citizen, a permanent 2.7 million acre Mixed Grass Prairie preserve can not only halt, but reverse the decline of prairie bird, pollinator, grass, and forb species and create a viable nesting, breeding, and feeding habitat corridor for migratory species for generations to come.

Unintended Beneficial Consequences of Restoration

The primary purpose of APCORR is to reverse the decline and prevent extinction of prairie species of all types native to the proposed project corridor. These goals will be realized by the restoration of a mixed grass prairie ecosystem large enough to support viable populations. Unintended beneficial consequences arise from this restoration process and should be enumerated and discussed. These unintended beneficial consequences are:

- carbon sequestration
- aquifer recharge
- soil runoff elimination
- waterway and stream water quality regeneration
- ecotourism
- job creation
- education
- citizen involvement
- incentivise marginal-use land sales within a declining market base

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