



Rewilding Texas Panhandle Plains

Proposal Questions

Mission/History Of Organization

Great Plains Restoration Council is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization helping people take care of their own health through restoring and protecting native ecosystems, particularly threatened prairies, plains, and waters. Based in Fort Worth, TX, GPRC founded the Ecological Health model (“the interdependent health of people, animals, and ecosystems”), and now teaches it around the country, as well as uses literary arts and other media to advance conservation. When we began over 20 years ago, native prairies and the Great Plains as a whole had become so degraded or destroyed they were wiped from the American consciousness. Even today, how many Americans have ever hiked in a wild prairie? From our work in Texas, to Oglala-led youth work on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, SD (and protection of 4,600 private acres adjacent to Badlands Nat’l Park), to a Gunnison’s prairie dog reintroduction in Santa Fe County, NM, the Houston coastal prairie and more, GPRC has built a new culture of caring.

JEDI Efforts and Impact

What better way to lead a new movement to take care of America’s most degraded and least protected major biome the Great Plains than through some of America’s least protected and most impacted people? Blending ecological recovery and protection with social work, GPRC is known for placing BIPOC-led protection of and access to endangered wild nature as an equal pillar of Environmental Justice. In particular our successful Restoration Not Incarceration™ program provided paid outdoor green

jobs and nature-based work therapy for youth and young adults to recover degraded prairie habitats and build new conservation of unprotected lands and become more unbreakable through ecological-based life skills such as processing and adaptation, communication, conflict resolution, self-sufficiency and teamwork, empathy vs. egocentrism through becoming an ecosystem participant, critical thinking, and much more to address or pre-empt personal and ecological catastrophes.

Final Success Over a multi-year stepwise process, GPRC and our partners Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TPWD), The Conservation Fund, and the Kiowa Tribe will create a new rewilding preserve tens of thousands of acres in size on the legendary but stricken Texas Panhandle Plains for endangered Texas bison, prairie dogs, prairie dogs, antelope, lions, elk, grassland nesting birds and much more which will also serve as a major outdoor public recreation opportunity for modern Americans to come out and experience wild Texas shortgrass/Llano Estacado Plains.

**Location
Details**

The Southern Great Plains, particularly the Texas Panhandle, once teemed with wildlife, like the African Serengeti, in such abundance that John James Audubon was moved to write, "it is impossible to describe or even conceive the vast multitudes of these animals." [Flores 2016.] Massive herds of bison spilled across the open grasslands alongside a profusion of pronghorn and elk. Abundant lesser prairie chickens conducted their ancient mating rituals, their booming sounds echoing for miles. Songbirds and raptors graced the skies and nested in the shortgrass and mixed grass prairies, and sprawling prairie dog colonies sustained a unique community of life. Industrious beaver created rich stream habitats with cottonwood galleries towering overhead. Indigenous cultures lived as part of this "ocean of grass" landscape for thousands of years before the arrival of Europeans. This arrival precipitated the Indian Wars and the Great Slaughter of bison, whose nadir was reached in the 1870s, as buffalo hunters streamed down from the Dodge City, KS area after wiping out the bison and Indian people up there. The bloody Red River Wars, Adobe Walls, Palo Duro Canyon, and more followed. Surviving Texas Panhandle Indigenous people, particularly Kiowa and Comanche, were moved out of Texas as the Indian Wars drew to a close.

Right before their final extirpation, a few of the genetically distinct Southern Plains bison were saved by rancher Charles Goodnight at the behest of his wife Mary

Biodiversity in Project Area

Climate: "Using prairie [restoration projects] ... "even when grown on infertile soils" ... "would lead to the long-term removal and storage of from 1.2 to 1.8 U.S. tons of carbon dioxide per acre per year. This net removal of atmospheric carbon dioxide could continue for about 100 years, the researchers estimate." (National Science Foundation report, 7 December 2006.)

Water: Established native prairie can absorb 9 inches of rainfall per hour before runoff occurs. (University of Northern Iowa, 2008), and (Clark O. 1940). "Interception of rainfall by prairie grasses, weeds, and certain crop plants." Ecological Monographs. 10: 243-277.)

Biodiversity: The populations of even once-common grassland nesting birds like meadowlarks are crashing. The Monarch butterfly whose main habitat is the original milkweed-rich prairies of the Great Plains has been recommended for listing under the Endangered Species Act and is already on the IUCN Red List. Lesser prairie chickens are already ESA-listed. Black-tailed prairie dogs meet ESA listing criteria but politics prevent their legal protection. Swift fox are rare. Black-footed ferrets, which rely on large prairie dog towns, are extinct in Texas. The rare Texas bison are stuck down in one canyon location at Caprock Canyons State Park, and they could potentially be wiped out in a severe event if a meta population of new conservation herds on the true grasslands is not restored. Antelope are low in number because of the endless barbed wire, unsustainable levels of hunting in the past from which they never recovered, and habitat loss.

This new preserve, which will result in a Conservation & Recreation Area or State Park, will begin providing an umbrella habitat for all Texas High Plains wildlife, both those that fit the Texas Wildlife Action Plan for Species of Concern and those not yet on the list, with bison at the top.

GPRC's main goal is to help Texas Parks & Wildlife acquire a landscape-scale conservation preserve in the northern Texas Panhandle in the Canadian River country that could then be leveraged and connected for bison reintroduction and other wildlife rewilding with the forgotten unflooded backcountry of Lake Meredith National Recreation (NPS) and just upriver the 12,000 acre Cross Bar, which came from an undeveloped helium reservation and is the only BLM land in Texas.

Expected Economic & Recreational Impact

Ann (Molly). [Repanshek 2019]. Their direct descendants reside today down in the canyons of Caprock Canyons State Park near Quitaque, TX, which is subpar broken habitat. They don't have access to their extensive ancestral grasslands up on top the Llano Estacado Caprock High Plains and Canadian River Country of the northern Texas Panhandle. Other prairie wildlife have also suffered declines.

The Texas Panhandle frontier has intense multicultural human history and story. The working group will ensure that multicultural history, storytelling, and engagement (American Indian, Anglo, Black, Hispanic, Arab and more), is baked into the conservation program. The new Texas Panhandle Plains preserve will protect and interpret real-life Indigenous knowledge (including botany) and provide a restored native grassland for Southern Plains Indigenous people to reconnect with and foster ancestral cultural/religious practices of the Texas Panhandle Plains shortgrass prairie ecosystem.

Not since the 1800s have Americans gone out to the Great Plains as a place of wildland, and then it was to tear it down. Today, few people alive have ever seen wild prairie. How many modern Americans have gone out to the Great Plains to hike, camp and trek wild Open Country plains grasslands?

Gifting the public with this intoxicating renewal experience in the land of sun, wind, grass and blue sky, and even providing nature-based work therapy volunteer opportunities, is a main goal.

This new ecoregion preserve, with its associated ecological and cultural restoration on the Texas Panhandle Plains, can connect history to the future via new participation and new stories, so its rich past isn't relegated to some bygone era in the history books. Instead, it will showcase a living, timeless and continuing heritage.

As a destination for nature

**Strategy &
Timeline For
Final Success**

This landscape-scale preserve project in the Texas High Plains is the culmination of 20+ years of GPRC work.

In 2009, the endangered, small herd of genetically distinct Texas bison, the main keystone species of the Texas High Plains, were long-confined to a 300 acre cage-like enclosure down in the broken below-rim lands of 13,000 acre Caprock Canyons State Park. Stepwise, we first had to at least get the buffalo freed as wildlife into the whole park. We were an instrumental voice in that success.

Then I (Jarid here, founder of GPRC) called up Carter Smith, the former Exec. Director of Texas Parks and Wildlife, and said, Carter, I know we love our Caprock and Palo Duro Canyon State Parks, but they really are just big holes in the ground. There is no State Park or conservation area on the Texas High Plains, the true shortgrass prairie /Llano Estacado plains. He agreed.

In November 2023, Texas voters passed the \$1 billion Centennial Fund (I served on the Steering Committee, led by Environment Texas), to purchase, protect and provide for new public lands, since after Texas became a state in 1845 it sold off most of its tens of millions of acres of public lands, making us public-land poor.

Creating new parks and public lands has become important common ground for us Texans, and shows social progress.

In fact, TPWD knows that there is no Great Plains National Park, so we as Texans are excited to do it ourselves at the State level!

Our coalition has completed GIS mapping, goals and objectives, design planning and strategy, and now at long last Texas Parks and Wildlife is requesting to do a site visit to a key property in the Texas Panhandle Plains that the 100-year owners are open to selling: the historic 80,000 acre Turkey Track ranch, which encompasses the battle sites of the Adobe Walls wars and has stunning ecological and topographical diversity, well-managed grasslands, and 26 miles of Canadian River and cottonwood gallery forests. With one swoop, we could accomplish all our main goals, due to its size. The Whittenburg family owns the ranch, and GPRC worked three-fold. 1. Build up our partners including Texas Parks & Wildlife, 2. have The Conservation Fund lead on the direct real estate /realtor conversations, and on our end, 3. through a private contact via the former Exec. VP of the Bank of Texas who lives in Fort Worth but grew up in the area (Wheeler, TX), speak with the Whittenburg family personally and get their interest about preserving their ranch as a wildland legacy, rather than just sell it to an investor corporation in Germany or Japan etc. and likely break it apart.

Before the end of 2025, accomplish a site visit with the State of Texas to the Turkey Track, and discuss and work out in person with the family and all key players present including the Kiowa Tribe a desired conservation outcome, plan, timeline, financials, and road map.

The property will likely cost about \$180 million, which is \$20M less than they first publicly offered it before taking it off the market after the Smokehouse Fire. (The fire was actually great for the grassland.)

The key success elements here has been the personal relationship building first with the Executive Office at TPWD, and now the Whittenburg family. That's how things get done in TX, once people can see in person the humanity of the other and get excited about important Texas-legacy things we might accomplish together. If all parties are able to work out a conservation plan and option, and TPWD is able to put down say \$40M or more via a special historical legacy request to the Leg – to hold the property under contract for a few years, then all

and history lovers, hikers and other recreationists, travelers, sightseers, bird watchers, universities, people interested in the growing field of eco-psychotherapy, and more, the Southern Great Plains Conservation and Recreation Area (or State Park) is expected to become a regional economic engine as well. Many studies have quantified the local economic benefits of conservation and recreation areas, State and National Parks, wildlife refuges etc.

**Key
Decision
Makers**

Here is the website for the Turkey Track Ranch. Remarkably, in a Southwest and American West that has faced so much overgrazing and other degradation, this 80,000 acre has been pretty well-managed and will be an astounding new Conservation Area or State Park.

<https://www.icon.global/turkey-track-ranch>

GPRC has accomplished the interest of the key decision makers, which are primarily the Executive Office of Texas Parks and Wildlife, and the Whittenburg family. The approach was described above in the story line. The business community will be absolutely essential in final success of this new preserve on the Texas High Plains in that this project is being offered as a new wildlife preserve and safe, public, shooting-free recreation area, and the remainder of the conservation purchase price will need to be supported by business and the public all across America. But we know it can be done. The 5.2 acre Klyde Warren Park in downtown Dallas cost \$112 million and people, business and the City made it happen.

Once we go public, we hope that businesses and people everywhere will help get the word out and support. It will be exciting and like a living art project of rewilding that we can all do together. We get to create and be creative with this project, out of a region that was totally conquered and dismantled, rather than fight, which is what most "environmental" (we prefer "ecological") projects must do.

parties will work to raise awareness, excitement and financial support for the full conservation takeout.

Ittleson Foundation in NYC, a two-time funder of ours, has offered to do a Funders Breakfast inviting high-level foundations from across the country.

This TCA grant would be a one-year capacity-holding support to allow GPRC to organize, run, execute, (and tactically problem solve where needed) all the next steps forward, including setting up a wildlands philanthropy fund with financial partners if needed.

If for some reason Turkey Track falls through, we will either seek another (though smaller) property in the same conservation priority region, or provide the same operation for the 6,440 acre Muleshoe National Wildlife Refuge west of Lubbock on the TX/NM border, which a couple months ago passed its 700,000 acre Land Protection Plan expansion goal for the next couple decades.

Our first step there would be to seek to expand the Refuge to connect to nearby lands in their Priority Areas and get a Texas bison conservation herd reintroduced on the Refuge. It would follow the same process outlined above re the Turkey Track.

The final Muleshoe National Wildlife Refuge Land Protection Plan can be found here: <https://ecos.fws.gov/ServCat/DownloadFile/232579>

Elevate Voices

GPRC has always been part of and meaningfully engaged – in leading capacities – people from underrepresented groups. GPRC and Atlanta’s Gangstas to Growers have already gone out to Caprock Canyons State Park in West Texas to help the Texas bison by removing a mesquite wall of thorny brush – by hand, since we found out they wouldn’t let us use power tools – to ecologically connect the prairie dog town with the buffalo watering hole. (Bison and other grazers love to graze on the nutritious grasses of a prairie dog town.)

Check out this video: “Getting It Done: Great Plains Restoration Council and Gangstas to Growers Help the Buffalo in West Texas”
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1eGGBel604qgBLvRavD2n0khgfw0aBgRM/view?usp=sharing>

This is Kiowa land, so our project is set up so that their voices are centered, and they will have the opportunity to tell the nation their stories and their POV. With Amanda Hill, the Kiowa Tribal Historian, and their new youth groups, leading on the Indigenous side, subsequently Comanche will be brought in.

For the local Panhandle communities, aside from the family work our inside influential player has done, we will wait until we’ve got the project secured, then we will use our mobilization to engage the City of Amarillo (including underrepresented folks) which is 50 miles west, as well as get the (very small in population) local Panhandle Plains communities excited about the economic, cultural and ecological prospects and proud historic nature of a new State Park or preserve, which can be a big economic boon to small Texas towns nearby.

TCA Funding Plan

This would be an operation-running grant. It’s been a challenge to get people to see or care about the Great Plains, especially the Texas /Southern Plains, that we are not Flyover Country, and furthermore that conservation should include people, particularly through the outdoor work health benefits of helping people help themselves, but the resistance is slowly changing. As we graduate to this lifetime culmination project, TCA funding will help GPRC coordinate and accelerate the entire operation, and build new financial capacity for this project, since most funds for this project have so far come from general support to date.

Measurable On-Ground Outcomes

Getting the Whittenburg Family, TPWD, the Kiowa Tribe, and The Conservation Fund all in agreement on a general conservation goal and path forward.

Designing that conservation takeout strategy with assigned responsibilities and beginning implementation

Achieving an option on the Turkey Track or similar property.

Designing a conservation plan for rewilding Texas bison.

Setting up all the technicals, including creation of the fund for completion.

How long it took to complete application

**Confidential
Items**

Yes please keep the details, particularly of the State's impending visit to the Panhandle and significant interest financially in this project, confidential. This has been years of work and these things could be scuttled by some misinformation hysteria from potential bad players like "land grab!" or "DEI!!!!!!!" or "they're taking our land to give back to the Indians!" etc., especially during the current terrible political climate. We have been very successful in keeping our work branded as healthy, vital and life-powerful, something for people of all colors, cultures and communities, but we are well aware of the depths of danger from those who writhe.

**Other
Relevant
Application
Details**

Thank you for your caring about the Earth and our children's health and future -- those of us with caring and empathy know we have to get through this terrible time, but we believe that everything that we all are collectively doing will be the connective tissue to that healthier future beyond 2050, even if's past our lives. Things never happen unless people make them happen. And this work is good work and a good use of a life.