

Kansas

Impact Report

The Nature
Conservancy



2024

Kansas Talent to Lead Region-wide Programs

We've always said that nature doesn't abide by things like fences and geopolitical boundaries. Being able to work across state lines and at the scale of entire ecosystems is one reason The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is so effective. For decades, TNC staff in Kansas have partnered across state lines to achieve larger conservation goals. From protecting our prairies in the Flint Hills and guiding the science team for the Mississippi River Basin, to creating the blueprint for renewable energy siting across the globe, staff in Kansas are ensuring TNC's mission is not hindered by artificial barricades.

So, it comes as no surprise that our talented and well-respected staff have once again been chosen to accelerate our conservation impact in order to meet critical 2030 goals. This summer, Kansas State Director Ben Postlethwait was named TNC's Great Plains division director, overseeing work in the states of Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota and Texas.

"When I started my career with TNC last year, I never could have foreseen such a shift," shared Postlethwait. "I'm humbled and honored by this opportunity to collaborate across state business units to achieve our big conservation goals. We are one team, and we're all in this together."

Brian Obermeyer, former Kansas director of land protection and stewardship and our first Flint Hills Initiative lead, has been promoted to lead high priority grassland conservation for the Great Plains. Grassland focal areas include the Flint Hills, the Northern Great Plains and the Southern High Plains. Fittingly, the last two extend into states in TNC's Western division.

"I plan to take advantage of the great momentum driving TNC's grassland conservation work," says Obermeyer. "Kansas is already at the heart of much of it, and I will ensure we remain committed to tangible, lasting results for one of the most imperiled habitat types on Earth."

Long-time TNC staffer and former Oregon State Director Jim Desmond is acting as interim Kansas director to bridge the gap between Ben Postlethwait's transition to division director and the hiring of a new Kansas state director who is expected to start in early 2025.



Brian Obermeyer (left) and Ben Postlethwait (right), image Credit: Katie Roby/TNC



About Us

TNC works across Kansas to protect prairies and streams—and help others manage their land with conservation in mind.



Kansas Field Office
PO Box 4345
Topeka, KS 66604

785-233-4400
kansas@tnc.org
nature.org/kansas

The Nature Conservancy is a global environmental nonprofit working to create a world where people and nature can thrive. Our mission is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. And we've worked to do that in Kansas for 35 years, permanently protecting 165,000 acres—including six nature preserves open for public visitation.

Our approach reflects decades of learning and refining, and the special role TNC can play side-by-side with partners, communities and decision makers. We have years, not decades, to take on the interconnected crises of climate change and biodiversity loss. By working together, we're overcoming barriers to the solutions our planet needs.

**Together,
we find a way.**



KANSAS STAFF

Kari Ames
Matt Bain
Adam Bauer
Natalie Busby
Tony Capizzo
Karen Casebolt
Justin Cobb
Zoë Colatarci
Nora Cox
Jim Desmond
Sid Fleming
Madilyn Gothard
Chance Jacobson
Kevin Luman
Tim Marshall
Paula Matile
Heidi Mehl
Elsi Miller
Robert Penner
Lindsey Reinarz
Katie Roby
Justin Roemer
Mason Scheetz
Hannah Sheridan
Susan Smith
Cole Starkey
Jenny Trucano Muller

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Sara Baer
Bill Blessing
Debra Bolton
William F. Bradley, Jr
Kelly Callen
David Dillon
Kelly Harrison
Rudy Herrmann
Richard L. Hines
Stacy Hoeme
Mary Ice
Brian Illig
Jeff Kennedy
Meleda Wegner Lowry
William M. Lyons
Barry Mayhew
John Mize
Joan Porsch
Patty Reece
Charles W. Rice
William M. Riley, Jr
R. Douglas Sebelius
Elizabeth T. Solberg
William Stueck
Dale Trott
Stephanie Turner



Leveraging Our Lands

TNC's unrivaled land portfolio gives us unique and powerful advantages in pursuing our mission. We use our preserves for many purposes: protecting biodiversity, demonstrating best management practices, testing innovative strategies and connecting people to nature.

New Protection at Preserves

This summer, we made headway toward our protection goals in two priority landscapes: the Southern High Plains and Great Bend Sand Prairie.

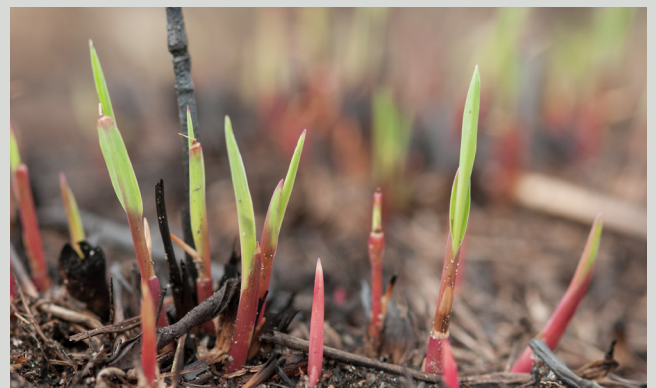
The Nature Conservancy acquired 375 acres adjacent to Little Jerusalem Badlands State Park in Logan County. A mix of Niobrara chalk bluffs, native prairie and cropland, this property was ripe for energy development and conversion. Now, it's permanently protected. In total, Smoky Valley Ranch has grown to nearly 19,000 acres.

Thanks to our partners at Ducks Unlimited, we also added over 600 acres to our Cheyenne Bottoms preserve, bringing our total protection to 8,650 acres.

A Standout Year for Prescribed Fire

Grasslands evolved with fire, including both natural wildfires and intentional use by Native caretakers before colonization. Today, prescribed fire remains a crucial tool for maintaining and enhancing prairie health. The Nature Conservancy has been a leader in using prescribed fire for more than 60 years to keep aggressive invasive plants at bay, enrich soil health and support thriving ranching economies. Throughout the year, our highly trained burn crews can be seen preparing for and setting prescribed fires on TNC preserves. They also help private landowners and our conservation partners, like the National Park Service and Konza Prairie Biological Research Station, burn at the right place, during the right time of the year and at the right frequency through the co-creation of burn plans, equipment sharing and technical support.

"Woody plant encroachment and herbaceous invasive species pose critical threats to the resilience of Kansas prairies. It has never been more important to work with our conservation partners to ensure frequent fire to maintain open grassland," says Flint Hills Initiative Manager Tony Capizzo. We're working to do just that. The Kansas chapter has one of the most impactful fire programs at the Conservancy, burning approximately 37,800 acres last year—more than any other state.



Hope for Grasslands

Imagine a Kansas where grasslands flourish:

The land, once depleted, now pulses with life. Native species reclaim their habitat, ensuring a resilient ecosystem for future generations. Healthy prairies capture carbon in the soil, slowing the impact of a changing climate and creating a healthier future for us all. Ranchers are finally recognized as proud environmental champions—their continued stewardship and adoption of conservation practices not only sustains their livelihoods, but also secures a legacy of abundance.

Our current reality is starker. Grasslands are the least protected habitat on earth. They are rapidly disappearing due to urban sprawl, woody plant invasion, conversion to cropland and energy development. Over 30 years, a rancher in western Kansas might expect to make about \$17 per acre, per year, to keep the grass “green side up.” Compare that to the potential profits of developing the land: \$76/acre per year if plowed and converted it to crops, \$167/acre per year to turn it into a ranchette or feedlot, as much as \$800/acre per year to turn it into a solar farm. When landowners are asked to wrestle with these economic scenarios, it’s no surprise why we continue to lose grasslands every day. But The Nature Conservancy has hope, and the ecosystems services that enrich our lives have value.

Through our Generational Grasslands program in the Southern High Plains, we are working to conserve grasslands at scale by focusing resources into the few remaining grassland cores, centering the needs of communities and breaking down barriers through creative solutions that ensure both people and nature thrive.

“

Growing up, every kid learned about the plight of the rainforest, but no one told them about the world’s most threatened terrestrial system in their own backyard. Grasslands, and those who care for them, deserve attention. The benefits they offer us like clean water, carbon storage, healthy soils, recreation and biodiversity are finally being recognized. This work is the first step toward monetizing these services that ranchers have been providing to society for generations.

MATT BAIN
Southern High Plains
Grassland Project Manager



Healthy Lands

Despite a history of many little houses on the prairie, Kansas has lost most of its natural habitats. Whether working on TNC preserves or assisting private land owners, we are protecting and stewarding imperiled grassland habitat and iconic wildlife.



Grasslands store immense quantities of carbon underground and keep it from being released into the atmosphere. But if a prairie is plowed, much of that carbon is released. Avoiding the conversion of grasslands in places like the Flint Hills, supporting ecologically-sound fire practices and restoring grasslands where they have been lost are important natural climate solutions. Combined with reducing reliance on fossil fuels and accelerating well-sited renewable energy, natural climate solutions offer immediate and cost-effective ways to tackle the climate crisis—while also addressing biodiversity loss and supporting human health and livelihoods. Learn more about natural climate solutions at [nature.org/NCS](https://www.nature.org/NCS).

Thank you.

The Nature Conservancy's accomplishments are only possible because of the many individuals, organizations, businesses and foundations that make financial contributions to our conservation programs.

View a list of our donors from fiscal year 2024 at:





Sustainable Rivers

Watch Ebb & Flow to learn more about the Sustainable Rivers Program.



Modernizing Dam Operations to Benefit Wildlife

The Sustainable Rivers Program, a partnership between the Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, seized an opportunity to implement environmental flow releases on the Kansas River and the Osage River in 2024. Water was discharged from the Tuttle Creek Lake reservoir north of Manhattan into the Kansas River to cue native fish spawning, and the release was tapered off more slowly than usual to avoid leaving freshwater mussels stranded on the banks of the river. Similar releases were completed from Pomme de Terre reservoir on the Osage/Marais des Cygnes system. TNC and partners will continue to implement environmental flows in 2025 and beyond, and monitor responses in fish, mussels and river habitat.

The Sustainable Rivers Program began in 2002 with eight rivers and has grown to 44 river systems across the nation, influencing 12,079 miles of U.S. waterways and 90 associated reservoirs and dams. With just two percent of our nation's three million miles of rivers and streams still free-flowing and undeveloped, the survival of our freshwater systems hinges on our ability to reduce the negative impacts of river infrastructure.

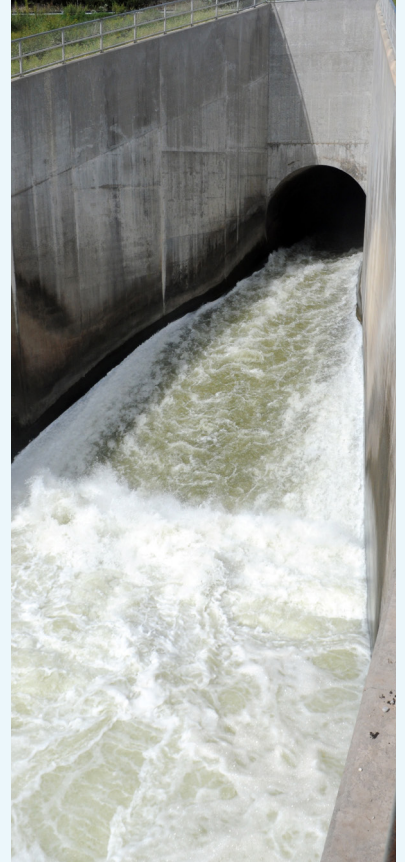


Image Credit: Kansas City District U.S. Army Corps of Engineers





Innovative Water Savings Ripple Across Western Kansas

It's a problem with no easy solution: people and nature need water, and sometimes there is not enough to go around. Kansas wetlands like the Quivira National Wildlife Refuge are fed by groundwater and stream flows, supporting thousands of migrating birds and other species each year. Farmers rely on the same groundwater - the Great Bend Prairie Sand Aquifer - to grow crops and fuel the local economy.

The Nature Conservancy works with farmers, local leaders, state agencies, federal partners and others seeking solutions that support both natural and human communities around Rattlesnake Creek. For the last four years, TNC has led an irrigation efficiency project to reduce the amount of groundwater pumped and used for crop fields while still maintaining harvest size and profitability. We provided farmers with technical assistance, cost share for more efficient irrigation technology and other voluntary, incentive-based practices such as invasive tree removal.

In August, the Fish & Wildlife Service announced that, thanks to the combined efforts of multiple programs, water use reduction targets for 2024 were exceeded by more than 17%. Perhaps even more exciting, the Kansas Department of Agriculture received a \$25 million federal grant to replicate our irrigation efficiency program across all five of the state's groundwater districts. We're proud to have created the model that will help conserve water across the state for years to come.

Freshwater

While the threats are urgent, there is still an opportunity for Kansas to have it all—protecting nature, clean water and a thriving agricultural industry. TNC leverages the collective power of people and place to ensure a sustainable freshwater future for Kansas.

“

These results demonstrate that the collective efforts of local communities, conservation groups, natural resource agencies and private industry drive on-the-ground solutions so that people and nature can thrive together.

HEIDI MEHL

Director of Water & Agriculture Programs in Kansas





Supporting Biodiversity

Global biodiversity continues to decline at an alarming rate. And this is the last decade we have to address the intertwined biodiversity and climate crises facing every being on this planet. Across Kansas, TNC protects the variety of plant and animal life that is crucial to our future.

Bison Restoration

TNC’s buffalo herds (also known as the American bison) produce approximately 1,500 buffalo in need of new homes every year. By returning some of these buffalo to tribal lands, we are healing and restoring a web of natural relationships that has been broken for hundreds of years. Eighteen buffalo from TNC preserves in Kansas were transferred in late 2023, and we will transfer additional buffalo after our roundup in November 2024.

Each buffalo herd plays a vital role within the community to which it’s transferred. In some cases, preliminary herds are returning to lands for the first time in more than 100 years. Other times they expand existing herds, diversify genetics and uplift community food sovereignty initiatives, all essential in rebuilding buffalo lifeways.



Image Credit: Justin Roemer/TNC

Returning a Species to the Wild

In September, nine extinct-in-the wild sihek (also known as Guam kingfishers) were released at their new home in TNC’s preserve and research station on Palmyra Atoll, 1,000 miles south of Hawai’i. The released sihek have a special Kansas connection: they were hatched and hand-reared at a quarantine facility at Wichita’s Sedgwick County Zoo. There, specialized bird keepers worked around the clock to feed, weigh and monitor the chicks as they grew from hatchlings to young adults. To ensure success, a skilled TNC avian team will closely monitor the population for the months to come. It is an inspiring demonstration of the power of partnership in turning the tide of extinction – and an exciting stepping stone to the eventual return of this iconic species back to Guam.

Watch *Flight of the Sihek* to follow the birds from Wichita to their release on the remote Pacific island of Palmyra Atoll.

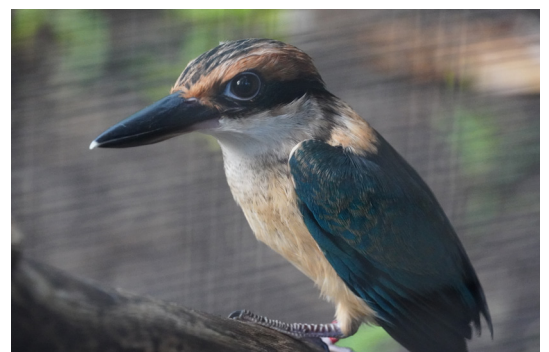
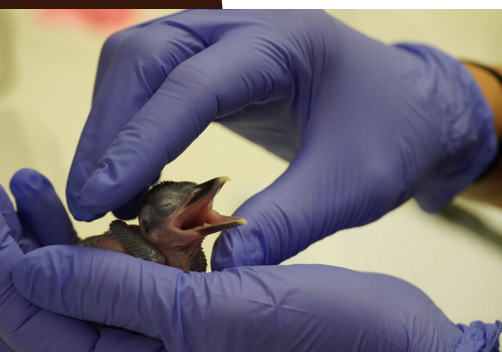


Image Credits: Thomas Mangloña II/KUAM News, Eric Royer, Thomas Mangloña II/KUAM

Building on Success

"All I was growing back then was dirt."

That's how Treg Hatcher felt about his family-owned cattle ranch in western Kansas before he enrolled in a Farm Bill conservation program that provides financial support and training for farmers, ranchers and forest landowners who want to be better stewards of the land. For Hatcher, that meant help buying water tanks to ensure his cattle have enough to drink and installing fences to do more rotational grazing.

The Farm Bill is America's largest federal investment in the voluntary conservation, restoration and management of America's private lands. It usually is funded to the tune of \$6 billion annually. From incentivizing climate-smart agricultural practices to opening doors for permanent conservation through agricultural conservation easements, this critical, typically bipartisan legislation benefits every single state in the country. Learn why it's one of our best opportunities to advance conservation in the United States and about the policies we'd like to see in the next Farm Bill at nature.org/farmbill.



Advocating for Nature

Government action can't do it all, but it is one of the strongest levers we have for quickly creating durable, large-scale solutions to protect nature. TNC works across aisles, using a practical, nonpartisan approach to help create legislation, help implement it, and help defend it.

Watch *Harvesting Hope* to learn how the Farm Bill helped save the Hatcher family's ranch in western Kansas.





The Nature Conservancy in Kansas
PO Box 4345
Topeka, KS 66604

