

## ENGAGEMENT OF TEXAS PRIVATE LANDOWNERS IN BIRD CONSERVATION

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### INTRODUCTION

Lehmann (1941) indicated that 93% of the six million acres of coastal prairie in Texas had been lost by 1937. Coastal prairie loss continued through the remainder of the 20th century and Smeins et al. (1991) estimated that <1% of the coastal prairie ecosystem remained in relatively pristine condition.

Attwater's Greater Prairie-Chicken (APC, *Tympanuchus cupido attwateri*), whose range is restricted to the coastal prairie, historically contained about one million individuals on the coastal prairie (Lehmann 1968). Its population declined as habitat acreage declined due to agricultural conversion, urban and industrial expansion, excessive grazing, invasion of the prairie by woody species and fragmentation of habitats (Lehmann 1941, Jurries 1979). Wild birds on the coastal prairie declined to near zero in the early 1990's and the recovery of the species became focused on a captive rearing program to release birds back into the wild (United States Fish and Wildlife Service 1996).

Individual conservation groups and agencies attempted to restore the coastal prairie, but the scale of efforts usually resulted in a few hundred acres being restored at isolated landownerships. The first major habitat restoration efforts started with the formation of the Coastal Prairie Conservation Initiative (CPCI) in 1999. The CPCI focused resources of multiple agencies in a planned effort to enlarge and connect blocks of existing coastal prairie. The CPCI is a good example of landscape scale habitat restoration requiring partnerships of federal, state, private organizations, and private landowners to foster conservation on the ground

at a scale that is meaningful to bird populations. The CPCI is a partnership of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, Texas Parks & Wildlife Department, The Nature Conservancy, and Grazing Land Conservation Initiative pooling their resources to assist private landowners retain family ownership, maintain historic values, profit from agriculture and conserve wildlife while achieving a collective goal of restoring the Coastal Prairie and re-establishing APC.

### FIELD ACTIVITIES

Conservation groups working to restore the coastal prairie and APC recognized that this subspecies would become extinct if the groups did not collectively combine their resources. Conservation organization field staff started informally working together in 1999 by combining grants to work on the same property to make it less expensive to the landowner. Conservation groups formalized the CPCI with signed agreements between organizations in 2003. Regulatory relief in the form of federal Safe Harbor programs ([http://library.fws.gov/Pubs9/safe\\_harbor\\_agree.pdf](http://library.fws.gov/Pubs9/safe_harbor_agree.pdf)) was obtained from the USFWS which assured landowners they would not incur any additional regulatory restriction if they improved their land for endangered species.

A land management specialist was hired that had the trust of local land owners and was the primary person to approach landowners and develop contract agreements. A private landowner that was a leader in area ranching was approached to be the "guinea pig" for the community in this conservation effort. As his

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contract proceeded, the landowner encouraged his neighbors to participate in the program. Extensive efforts were made to convince landowners that recommended practices would improve the profitability of their ranch, and natural resources while at the same time preserving historic values. Additionally, the Safe Harbor agreement assured them that the use of their land would not adversely be impacted. Each conservation group searched for funding that would fit this conservation effort.

#### PROGRESS

The CPCI was successful in treating brush and improving infrastructure of ranches on 80 000 acres of private ranch land and made progress to connect isolated blocks of coastal prairie. A program to release APC back into private lands within the coastal prairie began in 2007.

#### DISCUSSION

Habitat restoration in the form of brush control and fire on native grasslands was focused on the largest remaining blocks of closely situated coastal prairie. They are located in Goliad, Refugio and Victoria counties near the central Texas Coast. Landowners who own coastal prairie are relatively large cattle operators when compared to surrounding ranch lands. These landowners were not initially comfortable participating in cost-share conservation programs. They were very interested in the history, profitability, wildlife resources and private property rights. They were extremely cautious about signing up with a program that would potentially provide habitat for an endangered species on their land and with the potential for increased regulatory oversight.

The CPCI is successful because conservation groups were able to pool resources to meet common goals and objectives with willing

landowners. The CPCI provided cost share assistance and technical expertise to improve coastal prairie habitat important to prairie wildlife while increasing ranch profitability. Prairie-chicken management had to be compatible with the goals for the ranch whether the landowner had an interest in the APC or not. The landowners would not tolerate additional regulatory burdens to benefit APC and the Safe Harbor reduced those concerns. Above all, the conservation effort needed to be accomplished without altering the landowner's life style, privacy and history.

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