

Landowner Incentive Program:

A Win-Win for Western Oklahoma & the Panhandle

By Lesley B. McNeff

Most folks zipping down the highway in northwest Oklahoma or the Panhandle might go right past the town and never notice it. But there, just off the road, are hundreds of animal residents busy at work making homes for themselves and others.

A black-tailed prairie dog town is the place to be on the Southern High Plains. The prairie dog's burrows act as homes to other creatures (including birds, reptiles, amphibians, insects and mammals), and prairie dogs are an important part of the food chain, even if they are often near the bottom of it when eaten by swift foxes, golden eagles and snakes. The prairie dogs change the landscape in a way few other animals can by churning through the soil and enabling a diverse mix of grasses and broad-leaved vegetation to grow.

Over the past six years the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, along with the support of private landowners, has made huge strides in conserving prairie



Thomas Heglin (right), Gate, has been enrolled in the Landowner Incentive Program for three years. Larry Wiemers (left) is the Wildlife Department's LIP biologist who works with landowners through the program.

Quick Facts

Q. What is LIP?

- A. The Landowner Incentive Program was initiated in Oklahoma in 2003 to provide technical and financial assistance to private landowners for the restoration, enhancement and protection of habitats important to a wide range of wildlife. Keeping plant and animal populations healthy is the main goal.

Q. What will this program do for me?

- A. The LIP program might just pay you to help expand prairie habitat, which has changed significantly since the days of the homesteaders while still accomplishing your own goals for your property. For example, too many western Oklahoma landowners know the feeling of driving back from feeding the cattle on the “back 40,” and suddenly hearing a strange noise from under the truck. They stop to inspect it and discover they have wrapped a piece of old barbwire around an axle or drive-line. The bad thing is the wire came from the old fence they have wanted to remove for years. Time and maybe some extra money would have helped get rid of that mess a long time ago. And believe it or not, wildlife such as low flying lesser prairie chickens that are prone to colliding into fences they don’t see would benefit from its removal as well. The LIP program might be able to assist.

LIP assistance can also help with controlling salt cedar on your property. Salt cedar is an invasive woody plant encroaching on western Oklahoma streams. With an extremely high transpiration rate, an individual salt cedar plant can use as much water in a day as a cow will drink, and then deposit a salt crust upon the ground. The salt crust prohibits native plants from establishing themselves in the surrounding areas.



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Salt cedar often forms dense stands. Salt cedar has the ability to grow to a height of 12 feet. Removal of salt cedar is difficult and can add up to be quite costly. With a combination of mechanical, chemical, biological and fire control, reduction and eradication of salt cedar is obtainable.

Q. What’s so important about prairie dogs to shortgrass prairie habitat, anyway?

- A. There is a direct connection between the presence of the black-tailed prairie dog towns and the presence of other species, both plant and animal. Not only are prairie dogs an important food source for certain species, but they create habitat, such as living quarters and nesting chambers for burrowing owls, swift foxes, mountain plovers and a variety of reptiles and amphibians that are essential to the environment of the shortgrass prairie.

Q. How do I get involved?

- A. Print off the one-page application, available at wildlifedepartment.com, fill it out and return to: ODWC, Landowner Incentive Program, PO Box 53465, Oklahoma City, OK73152. 🐾



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Certain amphibians and reptiles, such as the Texas horned lizard, are essential to the health of grassland prairie environment in western Oklahoma.



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dogs by keeping the land where they live healthy while improving the bottom line of agriculture producers.

The Wildlife Department began the Landowner Incentive Program (through a federal grant) to help northwest Oklahoma and Panhandle landowners restore and protect unique habitats and wildlife. At its core, the LIP program provides landowners incentive payments to maintain wildlife habitat on their land over a 10-year contract.

Thomas Heglin of Gate has been enrolled in the Landowner Incentive Program for three years. His son suggested he look into the program as an additional source of funding for his farming operation.

“It has been a pretty good deal for me,” Heglin said, adding that he gets to earn money from his livestock operation while also getting additional LIP dollars to help protect important natural resources and help his bottom line.

“And I still get to hunt the prairie dogs,” Heglin said.

Heglin is referring to part of his agreement through the Landowner Incentive Program that allows him to hunt prairie dogs while managing their habitat. Contrary to popular belief, prairie dog holes are not major threats to cattle. Heglin has never lost a cow to stepping in a prairie dog hole. Cattle and horses know better.

“The prairie dogs have not expanded or diminished,” Heglin said. “I didn’t want them gone because they help keep my pastures clean. But I am allowed to hunt them and keep them in check.”

Heglin has also enjoyed his opportunity to work with Wildlife Department staff to enhance his property and finds other programs to participate in as well.

“I am enrolled in multiple programs, including the Landowner Incentive Program,” Heglin said. “If you are looking for help with your property, there is a wealth of programs out there. Just take the time and contact the right people.”

And Heglin is right. In most cases, livestock and wildlife management compliment each other and there are programs out there to help accomplish this.

The first phase of the Landowner Incentive Program focused on prairie dogs and their habitats, and the program has been an outstanding success. Private landowners and

the Wildlife Department have partnered together to conserve more than 14,000 acres of prairie dog towns — that is nearly 22 square miles of thriving habitat. The effort has proven to be a win-win in that is good for the landowners, good for the wildlife and good for all Oklahomans who love the wide-open spaces of northwest Oklahoma and the Panhandle. Wildlife biologists are working on enrolling 4,633 more acres through the program and are hoping to have the last contracts signed in the coming months.

While phase one of the Landowner Incentive is wrapping up, phase two is just beginning. Biologists are now actively looking for landowners who may have good habitat for lesser prairie chicken and other species of conservation need on their properties. Biologists can assist with plans to improve land with practices such as eastern

Tiffany Adams of Keyes recently signed a 170-acre agreement to participate in the LIP program. When Adams inherited a parcel of farmland and native pasture, she applied for and was accepted into the Landowner Incentive Program.

“The money will help us purchase a lot of items that will be useful for our ranching operation,” Adams said. “My first thought was being able to purchase solar panels for water wells in some of our pastures.”

Adams also took into account the number of educational wildlife opportunities that LIP would provide for her children. She has a number of hawks and eagles that visit the area, plus her children enjoy learning about the wildlife that call her ranch home.

According to Adams, the Landowner Incentive Program is helping her preserve habitat for many opportunities to view wildlife and educate her children. It’s a unique habitat, and Adams’ willingness is helping preserve it.

red cedar cutting, salt cedar control, and interior fence removal. But the Wildlife Department is not coming to the table empty-handed. The Department has available, through a federal grant, about one million dollars of incentive payments to landowners willing to work to keep their land healthy for wildlife.

To learn more about the next phase of the Landowner Incentive Program, pick up the May/June issue of *Outdoor Oklahoma* or contact Larry Wiemers, Landowner Incentive Program biologist with the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, at lwiemers@sbcglobal.net or (405) 990-7206. 🌿

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