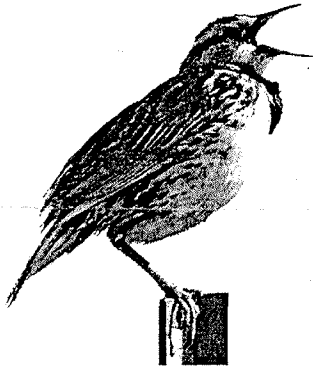


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# KDOT and Audubon Society Hatch Partnership to Promote Prairie Vegetation and Cut Mowing Costs



... by Ira J. Allen .....

What could the Kansas Department of Transportation (KDOT) and the Audubon Society of Kansas possibly have in common? That was the question running through my mind when I learned that these two entities were partners in a roadside project that has possibilities for the entire state. However, as I later learned, KDOT and Audubon have a good deal in common; finding this common ground required only some thought, time, and effort on the part of representatives of both agencies.

One of Audubon of Kansas's goals is to "build pride in prairies," and there are roughly 130,000 acres of state-administered roadsides in Kansas—prime potential for prairie vegetation. KDOT, on the other hand, receives some funding from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) to participate in the Prairie Passage Program, which partners Kansas with Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas. This program includes plans for protection and establishment of native grasses and wildflowers alongside highways, as well as for education of the public

(and members of the DOTs) about their prairie heritage. These two factors make KDOT and Audubon of Kansas natural partners.

To achieve their common goals, KDOT and Audubon have hatched a plan to cooperate in 10 pilot areas throughout the eastern third of the state. These areas are along the sides of such roadways as Highway 177 and I-35. For each pilot area, there is a committee representing local government and business interests, relevant expertise, and residents. This project, recently named the Integrated Roadside Vegetative Management Program, has been underway for about a year, and has received a very positive public response to date.

KDOT and Audubon held a workshop in February 2001 to bring

ship hopes to build public appreciation for managing roadsides in a naturalist manner. One of KDOT's goals in this project is to increase their efficiency in managing roadsides.

Managing tallgrass, a primary component of Kansas prairies, through this initiative will be very energy-efficient because it requires far less frequent mowing. Fred Markham, of KDOT, said, "it takes a tremendous amount of fuel to run all those mowers." Mowing is the primary management tool the Department has for roadside areas. This initiative will use that tool more efficiently.

Fred Markham, Ron Klataske of Audubon of Kansas, and others advocate revised mowing techniques. Although a 30-foot swath on either side of the road must still be mowed

## This initiative calls for far less frequent mowing, and that means lower fuel costs.

together interested parties throughout the state. The response has been heartening. Local experts in various fields have come forward to offer their assistance, and KDOT has been collecting seeds of wildflowers and grasses that will be used to supplement native stands in these pilot areas.

### Roadside Vegetation: Not Just for the Birds

KDOT and Audubon's partnership is intended to help reinvigorate and preserve prairie vegetation alongside Kansas's roadways. One of the goals, as mentioned above, is to build pride in prairies. That is to say, this partner-

ship hopes to build public appreciation for managing roadsides in a naturalist manner. One of KDOT's goals in this project is to increase their efficiency in managing roadsides.

The part of this equation that should bring smiles to state accountants' faces is the amount of time and energy the Department will save for each mile of highway mowed. As Markham said, "If we can reduce mowing and provide native vegetation, that's a win-win situation."

(continued)

### **...But Partly for the Birds**

In 1953, Aldo Leopold said, "The black prairie soil was built by the prairie plants, a hundred distinctive species of grasses, herbs, and shrubs; by the prairie fungi, insects, and bacteria; by the prairie mammals and birds; all interlocked in one humming community of cooperation." Sadly, the situation has changed dramatically in most prairie landscapes. Ironically, the wonderful soil created by the prairie is perfect for agriculture, which destroys the prairie plant community. What prairie is left in many states is primarily situated along roadsides, by railroad tracks, on rocky hills, and in remote locations. It is this fact that brings KDOT and Audubon into alliance with one another.

This partnership is working so well that both agencies are considering ways to cooperate in the future—and are discussing ways to involve more entities.

Audubon, naturally, is more interested in flora and fauna than roadside cost cutting, but this in no way hampers the partnership's agenda. The initiative will help to provide a habitat for animals that would otherwise be hard-pressed to find a place to live and nest. Although one might think that the only interaction between birds and highways would be of the head-on collision variety, such is not the case. Klataske says there is "no reason to believe that stands of tallgrass near highways are more dangerous for the birds, but there is a strong reason to believe that more birds can nest and raise broods in unmowed vegetation." This would include birds like the Bobwhite Quail and the Meadowlark, state bird of Kansas. Fortunately for Kansas, the native prairie has been resilient along roadsides, and we do not have to reseed most areas completely, as do

some states with similar programs.

Throughout the state, drivers can see switch-grass, bluestem, Indian-grass, and many other species of native vegetation along the roadside. This initiative will institutionalize naturalistic management of these roadside prairie areas.

### **...And Ultimately, for the Drivers**

The money KDOT currently spends maintaining roadsides goes primarily toward mowing costs. Markham said, "This initiative puts the agency in the driver's seat—we're not fighting fire; we're doing preventative maintenance," which allows personnel to use the funds saved for other purposes—like make improvements to the roads.

And there are several other benefits that will accrue from this initiative to the average Kansas driver.

Perhaps chief among these are the benefits that can be expected during the wintertime. Although Kansas certainly doesn't get as much snow as, say, Minnesota, anyone who has spent a winter here knows how the wind can create horizontal or ground blizzards. Swaths of tallgrass with the proper setback (30 ft. is recommended) can trap blowing snow, reducing the impact of 30+ mph winds that would otherwise buffet your car with snow and sometimes even dirt. This also can produce a snow fence effect, reducing snowdrifts on the road, and that can save time and money after a big snowfall.

As Klataske noted, "if the vegetation holds this snow, you reduce the cost of snow removal and you reduce the amount of salting—and hopefully

reduce the human cost of winter accidents."

There is some evidence from a similar effort—the Iowa Living Roadway Project—to suggest that such initiatives enhance tourism, as well as local appreciation of place. It would certainly be nice to get rid of the stereotype that Kansas is boring driving, and it is logical that more colorful and interesting roadsides could help dispel that. It also stands to reason that more interesting roadsides could help promote driver attentiveness and perhaps play a small role in reducing sleepy driver syndrome.

"When KDOT accepted the challenge that the Audubon Society gave us, a major goal was educating the public," said Markham. The partnership has already held public workshops to discuss the project, and interested individuals are invited to contact Ron Klataske of Audubon (rklataske@hotmail.com) or Fred Markham from KDOT (fred@ksdot.org).

This partnership is working so well that both agencies are considering ways to cooperate in the future, and ways to involve more entities in future initiatives. Klataske said, "There are all kinds of opportunities for spin-offs," and Markham concurred: "We're working together on the pilot projects, but we're expanding the partnership to other groups as well."

So for all those that think interagency partnership is logistically impossible, or who feel their agency is simply too different from another's for a partnership to work, let KDOT and the Audubon Society of Kansas be an example. The beauty of their partnership is its emphasis on common goals, and its focus on what is possible, rather than on what isn't. ■

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