

Iowa once was covered with Tallgrass Prairie. Most of the prairie has been converted to farmland – some of the most productive farmland in the world. As the global population rises toward a projected 9 billion people by 2050, agricultural production will become more vital than ever.

The Nature Conservancy is a science-based conservation organization, working with partners, including farmers, to conserve the most biologically important places in the world. The Conservancy has identified several priority conservation areas in Iowa, and we work with agricultural partners to conserve and restore habitat in those priority areas. In Iowa and throughout the Midwest, the Conservancy partners directly with farmers, government agencies and other organizations to sustain agricultural production and natural ecosystems in healthy “working” landscapes. The Conservancy and its partners:

- use science to identify conservation targets, establish sound conservation goals and apply performance based measurement standards in priority conservation areas;
- develop private financial tools and resources to encourage farmers to try alternative practices;
- help farmers evaluate the costs and benefits of these options for their farm management.

Supporting compatible agricultural practices is a collaborative effort for the Conservancy in Iowa. Conservancy staff work with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Iowa Soybean Association and other groups on incentives to reward farmers for environmental preservation and improvement. The Conservancy is one of 18 organizations participating in the Iowa Grassland Alliance, which works on



Fish survey in Pike Run Creek (©Matt McAndrew)

strategies to manage grasslands for food, fiber, clean water and recreation.

Conservancy staff members also work directly with farmers to protect natural areas. We are the stewards for conservation easements with farmers in the Loess Hills, Little Sioux Valley and elsewhere in Iowa. Where grazing can help conserve native grasslands, the Conservancy leases grazing rights to local ranchers.

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For More Information

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Pike Run & Boone River Watersheds

Incompatible agricultural practices are among the leading causes of declines in native freshwater ecosystems worldwide, due in large part to runoff that can harm aquatic life. Through our Pike Run and Boone River Watershed Projects in Iowa, the Conservancy is working with groups such as the Iowa Soybean Association and farmer-run Soil and Water Conservation Districts to measure nitrogen uptake and runoff. Water quality changes are monitored, and the data is shared with landowners. The Conservancy and its partners are also exploring potential cost savings for farmers.

Pike Run Creek, a small southeast Iowa stream that flows into the Cedar River near Muscatine, is lined by a dense growth of rooted aquatic vegetation that provides habitat for many fish species, including the weed shiner, blackstripe topminnow, grass pickerel and pirate perch. This 13,500-acre watershed contains a tremendous diversity of habitats and species that are threatened by excessive nutrients and sedimentation.

The Conservancy and the Muscatine Soil and Water Conservation District have hired a watershed coordinator to work with landowners on soil and water conservation programs including conservation tillage, nutrient and animal waste management systems, stream buffers, grazing systems, wetlands restoration and septic system improvements.

The Boone River is a Des Moines River tributary in the west-central part of the state. It flows through an intensely farmed area and has been identified as a high-priority area for conserving freshwater life in the Upper Mississippi River basin. The Conservancy is working with partner organizations and landowners to establish science-based conservation goals for the watershed involving hydrology, water chemistry and physical habitat improvements. The participants will discuss and if they are needed, recommend alternative farming practices and financial incentives to

support them. The goal is to conserve native freshwater biodiversity in ways that are scientifically and economically sound and accepted by the farming community.

Loess Hills

In the Loess Hills the Conservancy works closely with private landowners to achieve environmental and agricultural goals. The bluffs that run down Iowa's western border are characterized by small, privately owned tracts of land. The Loess Hills prairies and oak woodlands are imbedded in fields of row crops and pastureland. The Conservancy is assisting landowners to access funds that can be used to apply fire and mechanical clearing to non-native brush and trees to improve grazing lands and native habitats. The Conservancy also is using conservation easements to promote environmentally compatible grazing and farming. Many Loess Hills landowners come to the Conservancy when selling family land, knowing it carefully tends property that has been in their families for generations.

The Conservancy has acquired conservation easements on several farms to create buffer zones around the Conservancy's Broken Kettle Grasslands north of Sioux City.



Burn crew training at Swamp White Oak (©Barbara Buss)