From Easement to Stewardship
Flint Hills ranches get a conservation boost

Conservation easements have long been an important tool to protect farms, ranches and working forests across the United States. They have been especially effective in the Flint Hills, where nearly all the land is privately owned and more than 110,000 acres have been permanently protected with conservation easements. While easements are an effective strategy to curb the threat of development of native grasslands, other conservation challenges remain.

“Invasive species and the encroachment of trees are a pressing ecological issue in the Flint Hills,” says Tony Capizzo, Flint Hills Initiative manager.

That’s why The Nature Conservancy launched a new initiative to help landowners enhance the conservation value of eased properties in the Flint Hills of Kansas and Oklahoma. Stewardship assistance may be in the form of help with prescribed burning, equipment loans, mapping of invasive species or cost-share dollars. Emphasis will be placed on enhancing biodiversity of the property, and ongoing monitoring of plant and animal communities will measure success.

“Layering this additional conservation on top of easements advances our goal of maintaining the last expanse of tallgrass prairie in a truly meaningful way,” explains Capizzo. “And we hope that by providing landowners support, more will consider the long-term protection of their land through conservation easements.

To be eligible, land must have a perpetual conservation easement, but it does not need to be one held by TNC. Learn more at nature.org/flinhills.
Smoky Valley Ranch Made Whole Again

For the first time in 150 years, Smoky Valley Ranch is on its way to being entirely grassland. When The Nature Conservancy purchased the western Kansas shortgrass prairie property in 1999, several parcels had been carved out of the ranch, sold to other buyers and converted to cropland. TNC always intended to acquire those inholdings and make the ranch whole again. The final 528-acre piece was purchased this spring.

“Prairie is a process as much as it is a place you can point to,” says Matt Bain, western Kansas conservation manager. “It is a process that includes fire and grazing. Now that the ranch is completely unfragmented, we can better manage those processes.”

It won’t happen overnight, though.

“Reconstruction is a better word for it than restoration,” explains Bain. “Many of the native seeds we need to return this land to prairie aren’t commercially available, so we’ve had to hand-collect some seeds. And it will take a few years of cover crops and waiting out the long-term effects of residual herbicide before we can even begin planting in some places.”

Still, it’s a vision long-awaited for the ranch—where the goal is to conserve what’s left of the native prairie for the native wildlife that depend on it—and also for the ranchers who depend on it for their livelihood. The now 18,000-acre Smoky Valley Ranch welcomes visitors to the 1 and 5.5 mile hiking loops on the western boundary. Learn more at nature.org/smokyvalleyranch.