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LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE FIRST 10 YEARS OF THE OAKS AND PRAIRIES JOINT VENTURE'S GRASSLAND RESTORATION INCENTIVE PROGRAM (GRIP)

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ABSTRACT

The Oaks and Prairies Joint Venture (OPJV) was formed in 2008 as a public-private partnership of agencies and organizations working across jurisdictional boundaries in portions of Texas and Oklahoma, USA. The OPJV's major focus is reversing declines of bird populations by supporting strategic habitat conservation (biological planning, conservation design, conservation delivery, mission-based monitoring, and assumption-driven research) for northern bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*), grassland-obligate species, and their respective habitats. Our objective for this paper is to document and share a decade of lessons learned in developing a partnership-based native grassland conservation program to meet grassland bird conservation targets. We share lessons learned about how to manage partnership-based, large-scale habitat incentive programs to better target project locations and habitat practice types. To establish initial shared purpose, OPJV partners drew from population and habitat objectives in various state, national, and international bird conservation plans, stepped down to ecoregion levels, to establish the OPJV Grassland Bird Conservation Business Plan. The plan has 4 strategies directly contributing to the achievement of OPJV grassland bird biological objectives that are directly supported by OPJV staff or resources (or both). The overall objective for 2015–2025 was 619,978 ha (1,532,000 acres) improved within 40 focal counties, representing 1/3 of all counties in the OPJV. Our main strategy was to provide financial incentives through the OPJV Grassland Restoration Incentive Program (GRIP) to private landowners for conducting beneficial grassland bird habitat management practices. Since inception in 2013, GRIP has treated over 44,515 ha (110,000 acres) on private lands in Texas and Oklahoma, with the goal of maintaining high-quality grassland bird habitat on treated hectares for ≥ 5 years. In 2017, OPJV partners working with USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, began a 5-year, \$6.1 million partnership to provide additional technical and financial assistance to private landowners interested in grassland conservation through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). A project scoring system was designed to strategically encourage individual projects to include prescribed fire—one of the lowest cost practices per hectare—as a recurring practice to maintain program-achieved grassland improvements. Post-inception of the RCPP, the area treated with prescribed fire increased from approximately 809 ha (2,000 acres)/year to 3,237 ha (8,000 acres)/year, while maintaining average annual hectares of all other beneficial practices. Beginning in 2013, bird point count surveys were conducted annually to monitor northern bobwhite and grassland bird populations, including a subset of points under the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative (NBCI) Coordinated Implementation Plan. To date, nearly 25,000 individual point counts have been performed in Texas ($n = 20,111$) and Oklahoma ($n = 4,558$). Working together, OPJV partners have made significant progress toward meeting grassland bird habitat and population objectives, while tracking progress and improving methods. However, there is still considerable work ahead.

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Key words: *Colinus virginianus*, Grassland Restoration Incentive Program, habitat objective, incentive program, northern bobwhite, Oaks and Prairies Joint Venture

The Oaks and Prairies Joint Venture (OPJV) was formed in 2008 as a public-private partnership of federal and state agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), universities, tribes, private landowners, businesses, and other partners working across jurisdictional boundaries in portions of Texas and Oklahoma, USA within the Oaks and Prairies Bird Conservation Region (BCR) and the Edwards Plateau BCR (Figure 1). The OPJV is guided by a management board with representatives from 14 agencies and organizations and supported by a science technical team and various Local Initiative Teams (LITs) representing dozens of additional partner organizations as well as other interested individuals. The OPJV mission is “to plan for and facilitate bird habitat conservation, research, and outreach in an effort to ensure sustainable populations of priority bird species in the Edwards Plateau and Oaks and Prairies Bird Conservation Regions in Oklahoma and Texas” (OPJV 2021).

Over the past 3 decades, an entire suite of North American grassland birds has experienced significant declines (Brennan 1991; Knopf 1994; Rosenberg et al. 2016, 2019). These declines are primarily attributed to the landscape-level loss of suitable habitats that historically supported stable populations of >30 species of migratory and resident grassland birds, including northern bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*; Brennan 1991, Williams et al. 2004, Brennan and Kuvlesky 2005, McCracken 2005, Hernández et al. 2013). It is unlikely that any single conservation action or policy will adequately address the needs of differing species, but clearly, a coordinated, strategic approach must be employed at a landscape level, and especially on private lands, to ultimately solve this crisis (Drum et al. 2015). The OPJV’s major approach to stabilize and reverse declines of bird populations was the implementation of strategic habitat conservation (biological planning, conservation design, conservation delivery, mission-based monitoring, and assumption-driven research) for northern bobwhite, grassland associated bird species, and their respective habitats (NEAT 2006, USFWS 2008, Giocomo et al. 2017).

Starting in 2008, partners used existing population and habitat objectives in various state, national, and international bird conservation plans, stepped down to ecoregion levels, to establish focus areas (clusters of focal counties) to concentrate partner conservation efforts, and increase the likelihood of detecting potential population-level impacts for priority bird species. The OPJV’s focus areas were developed based on a variety of factors including the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative’s (NBCI’s) Biologist Ranking Index (BRI) and Breeding Bird Survey data, and were analogous to NBCI focal landscapes as described in the “tiered delivery” vision of the NBCI Coordinated Implementation Program (Figure 1; Sauer et al. 2008, OPJV 2010, Morgan et al. 2014). The objectives of this paper are to document a decade of lessons learned in developing a partnership-based native grassland conservation program to meet grassland bird conservation targets, and share some lessons learned about how to manage partnership-based, large-scale habitat

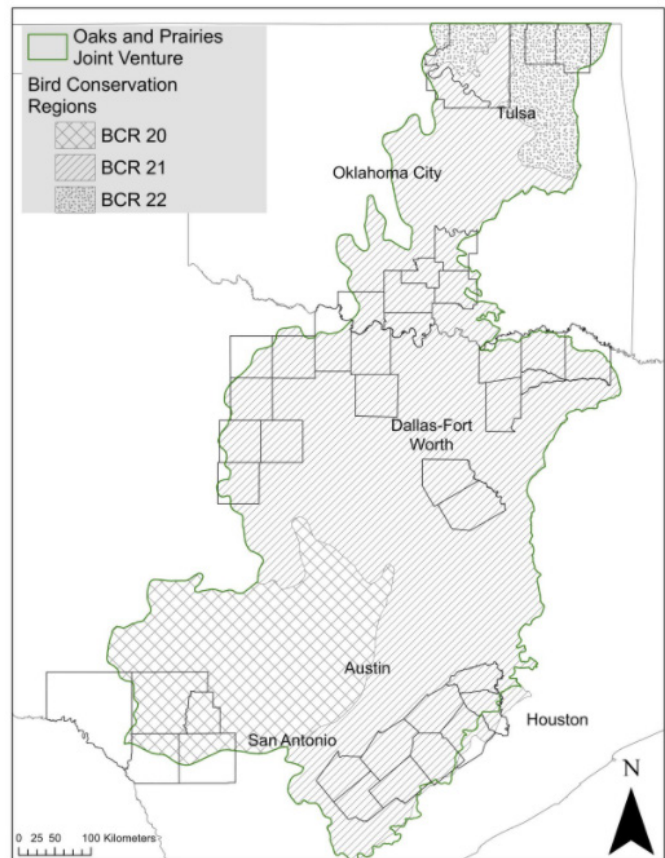


Fig. 1. The location of the Oaks and Prairies Joint Venture in Oklahoma and Texas, USA. The geography encompasses Bird Conservation Regions 20 (Edwards Plateau), 21 (Oaks and Prairies), and portions of 22 (Eastern Tallgrass Prairie). The counties shown are focal counties for the Grassland Restoration Incentive Program (GRIP), which were determined based on the Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative’s Biologist Ranking Index and Breeding Bird Survey data as well as other factors.

incentive programs to better target project locations and habitat practice types.

OPJV partners established the OPJV Grassland Bird Conservation Business Plan with 4 strategies directly contributing to the achievement of OPJV grassland bird biological objectives that are directly supported by OPJV staff or resources (or both). These strategies were 1) providing financial incentives through the OPJV Grassland Restoration Incentive Program (GRIP) to private landowners for conducting beneficial grassland bird habitat management practices, 2) supporting local landowner cooperative conservation efforts, 3) developing market-based conservation delivery strategies, and 4) implementing a Strategic Communications Plan (OPJV 2015). We will discuss the first 2 strategies in the context of the NBCI Coordinated Implementation Program as an example of the “tiered delivery approach” envisioned by the NBCI. We will also discuss lessons learned from building a landscape-level approach to deliver conservation practices through GRIP to achieve OPJV partners’ shared grassland conservation goals.

ESTABLISHING A SIMPLE AND SCIENCE-BASED GRASSLAND RESTORATION INCENTIVE PROGRAM

The Grassland Restoration Incentive Program (GRIP) started with the desire of OPJV partners and staff to create a simple financial incentive conservation program focused solely on native grassland habitat management that could remove common obstacles to conservation implementation. The idea was also to facilitate ownership of the program by the full spectrum of wildlife professionals who routinely work with private landowners. First, 40 focal counties were established, representing about 1/3 of the total counties in the OPJV geography, in an effort to concentrate financial and technical resources, and increase the likelihood of having a measurable, positive impact on grassland bird populations. Second, the number of conservation practices available in GRIP was limited to 7 select native grassland management practices: brush management, cross fencing, firebreak construction, herbaceous weed treatment, prescribed fire, prescribed grazing, and range planting. And third, to further simplify the design of the program, OPJV partners adopted existing U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) conservation practice standards and specifications already in place, all to address one problem—declining grassland bird populations. GRIP also used the most recent USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) practice cost list to determine conservation practice costs. Diverse state, private, and corporate funding sources were used (\$5,000–\$450,000 single- and multi-year grants) to complete practices along with landowner match. Non-governmental organization partners served as fiduciary organizations, holding grants and handling payments to landowners, to reduce administrative burden and create opportunities for private landowners.

All projects submitted for consideration were evaluated by OPJV staff and partners to ensure limiting factors for grassland birds were addressed and that a plan was in place to continue to address those limiting factors for at least 5 years. The minimum project size was set at 10 ha (25 acres) of proposed management, equal to the estimated territory size of a northern bobwhite breeding pair (Lee 1994, Brennan et al. 2020). After enrollment was opened, a group of OPJV staff and local partner biologists reviewed projects on a rolling basis. The partner biologists were stationed within or near focus areas and had grassland management and grassland bird experience. Collectively, these reviewers were called Local Initiative Teams (LITs). Biologists or project managers (qualified individuals with grassland management or biology backgrounds) and private landowners subsequently implemented approved GRIP projects. Contracts were evaluated, signed, and implemented, usually within 2–4 weeks. This quick turnaround time was essential to address time-sensitive practices such as prescribed fire and native range plantings.

A grassland bird monitoring plan was initiated in 2013. We established roadside bird survey routes in 39 focal counties

to tie conservation work to bird population objectives and to potentially detect changes in populations at the county level. Our surveys followed similar methodology to the Breeding Bird Survey (Sauer et al. 2008). Additionally, the OPJV conducted spring bird point counts and fall covey counts on one officially designated NBCI Coordinated Implementation Program (CIP) area to identify effects of practices at a local level. As a result, local-, regional-, and landscape-level data were collected, which were applied to a variety of analyses to assess success and effectiveness.

ADDING PROGRAM COMPLEXITY AND RESOURCES

With the advent of new programs in the 2014 Farm Bill, the OPJV pursued a Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) grant with NRCS. The RCPP was designed to foster diverse partnerships capable of spending federal conservation dollars in a new and innovative fashion. After two unsuccessful OPJV partner attempts, the National Wild Turkey Federation, on behalf of the OPJV, was awarded an RCPP grant in 2016. The grant resulted in a \$6.1 million, 5-year investment. About half of the funds came from OPJV partners and half through NRCS programs. The grant included support for both technical assistance (salary for 3 conservation delivery biologists) and financial assistance through NRCS's Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP). The newly hired biologists would have NRCS planning credentials and access to the NRCS computer system to guide contracts through the federal contracting process from start to finish. This RCPP grant, while not necessarily innovative from a conservation practice standpoint, continued the same approach of vastly narrowing conservation practice options to increase both the quality and quantity of enhanced native grassland habitat within OPJV focal counties. The result was a model that followed portions of the first iteration of GRIP enmeshed with NRCS guidelines to acclimate project managers and biologists not employed through NRCS to the process of using EQIP financial assistance.

Adding RCPP resources to GRIP dramatically increased funds available for technical and financial assistance through the OPJV. The RCPP-funded biologist positions received funding for 5 years and were strategically located in Oklahoma, North Texas, and South Texas (Figure 2). This allowed for more direct communication with project managers in each of the focus areas across the OPJV geography. The addition of these positions increased both the total number of projects and communication among partners (Figure 3); those increases were due in large part to the positions serving as liaisons between project managers and the complex NRCS systems. Another benefit was having a wildlife-centric presence in NRCS field offices, particularly in the offices where biologists were stationed. Financial assistance from RCPP provided not only a significant increase in project funds but also a more consistent conservation funding source. Over \$2.1 million in

financial assistance was made available to private landowners, which ultimately led to a proportional increase in hectares impacted on an annual basis (Figure 3).

The expansion of GRIP with federal support added much-needed certainty for annual financial assistance availability with the 5-year agreement, but it also added layers of complexity. For example, the RCPP process was slower overall, with contracts being executed approximately once every 6 months. Additionally, all RCPP-funded projects were required to be run through the NRCS contracting process and were subject to NRCS sign-up, or “batching” deadlines that included a 30-day sign-up period. In contrast, prior to adding NRCS-RCPP, GRIP projects were planned, completed, and reimbursed within weeks or a few months based on the amount of conservation dollars available and the types of practices.

Most of the projects approved during the early years of GRIP were brush management, our most expensive practice per hectare, and grazing-oriented with little emphasis on the use of prescribed fire, our least expensive practice per hectare. In an effort to stretch funding, increase overall impact, and address partner concerns, a new scoring process

(i.e., screening tool) was implemented in 2018. This process helped shift project design toward more extensive and cost-efficient practices such as prescribed fire and prescribed grazing (Figures 4, 5). The scoring process allowed for arithmetic evaluation of project benefit with project cost. Projects implemented since 2018 have shifted focus toward prescribed fire and away from more intensive and expensive brush management activities in project design. To date, over

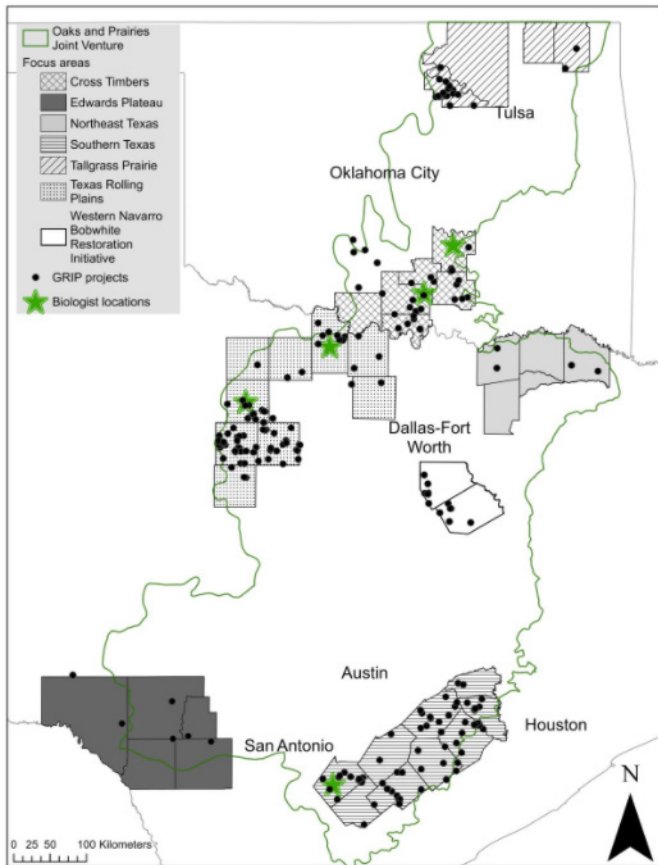


Fig. 2. The location of Grassland Restoration Incentive Program (GRIP) focal counties and GRIP projects from 2013–2021 in the Oaks and Prairies Joint Venture. Focal counties include 30 counties in Texas and 10 counties in Oklahoma. Staff members are located in key areas in focal counties, and projects typically are most concentrated around staff locations or locations of active partner biologists.

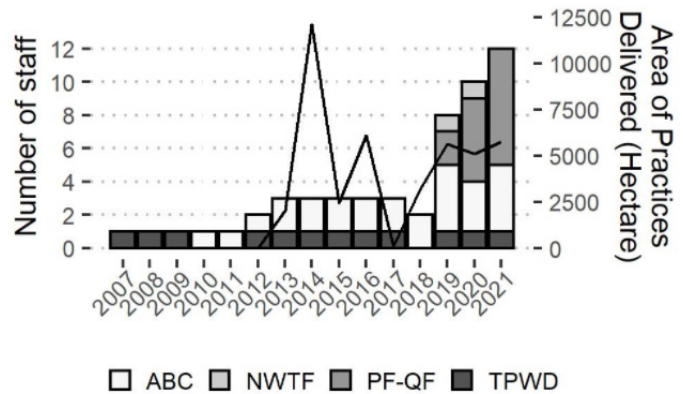


Fig. 3. Number of Oaks and Prairies Joint Venture (OPJV) and partner staff members and area of practices delivered (ha), 2007–2021. The number of staff of the OPJV has increased since its establishment in 2007–2008, and has grown most significantly since the incorporation of the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) grant into the Grassland Restoration Incentive Program (GRIP) in late 2018. Additionally, the number of OPJV partners contributing staff has increased since 2018, including American Bird Conservancy (ABC), National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF), Pheasants Forever-Quail Forever (PF-QF), and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD). Over time, the number of hectares delivered has also increased due to increases in staff and new sources of financial assistance such as the RCPP.

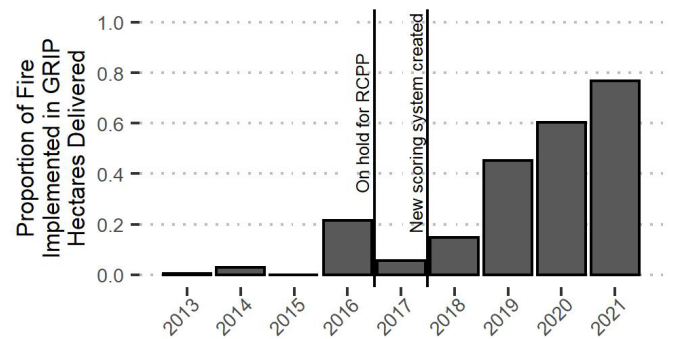


Fig. 4. The proportion of all delivered hectares that were prescribed fire hectares in the Grassland Restoration Incentive Program (GRIP), 2013–2021. This proportion has changed considerably over the years since program establishment. In the early years of GRIP (2013–2017), prescribed fire treatments were not as frequently implemented as other practices. During 2017, the number of projects in general decreased as the OPJV entered a holding pattern while it waited for implementation of the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) grant. Once the grant was implemented, and with the establishment of a new scoring system that prioritized prescribed fire treatments, the proportion of fire-treated hectares out of all project hectares vastly increased.

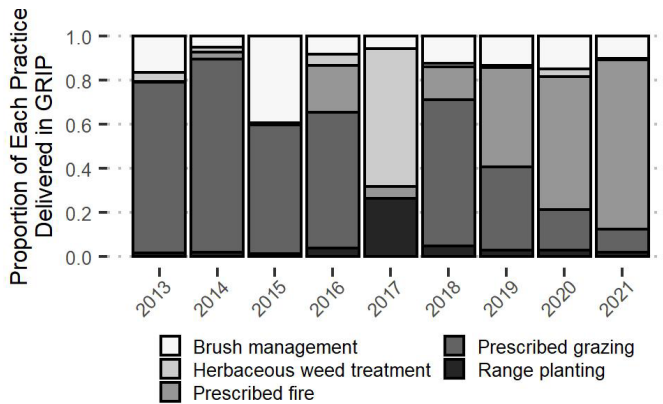


Fig. 5. The proportion of all delivered hectares by each treatment type in the Grassland Restoration Incentive Program (GRIP), 2013–2021. This proportion varied over time, with a dramatic shift in project priorities post-2017. In 2013–2016, many projects incorporated prescribed grazing and brush management. However, after the incorporation of the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) grant into GRIP, and the development of a new scoring system in 2018, prescribed fire was prioritized, and prescribed grazing and brush management accounted for a smaller proportion of delivered hectares.

44,515 ha (110,000 acres) have been treated, with over 12,140 ha (30,000 acres) of those treatments as prescribed fire (Figures 4, 5). This shift in focus from intensive management practices to extensive management practices created more opportunities for grassland bird conservation in line with OPJV objectives. Brush management alone has not adequately addressed the grassland conservation crisis across the southern Great Plains despite years of expensive efforts from many conservation organizations (Scholtz et al. 2021).

LESSONS LEARNED

It took >10 years of combined partner efforts to build GRIP. Many lessons have been learned along the way, including lessons regarding how to manage partnership-based, large-scale habitat incentive programs to better target location and habitat practice types. We have compiled a list of lessons learned to facilitate and guide the development of future programs that may encounter similar complexities.

Clearly identify goals of the plan and the program.

Identifying where to work and how many hectares would be needed to achieve objectives can be difficult. To identify these, we incorporated a scientific plan based on national and regional bird population objectives to create habitat goals (in hectares) needed to achieve those objectives within our focal counties (OPJV, unpublished document). Additionally, our conservation business plan tied area objectives to a plan of action which included the amount of funding needed to accomplish the conservation for that total area (OPJV 2015, Giacomo et al. 2017). The inclusion of straightforward and focused goals in both the science and business plans

greatly assisted in obtaining buy-in from partners, funders, and program beneficiaries while also keeping the larger, long-term project on track. We found that buy-in works at the “speed of trust.” It is a slow process that requires multiple conversations, a significant time investment, and frequent communication of program efforts and effectiveness to all partners.

We found active partner participation to be critical when designing a conservation delivery program. As with the aforementioned plans, one of the first steps in our program design was the development of straightforward and focused goals intended to keep the program on track throughout the design process and through revisions made during the lifetime of the program. Developing these goals also would help assess the overall success of the program. These goals incorporated not only habitat objectives, but also the underlying bird population objectives, the people (i.e., staff and partners) required to achieve those habitat objectives, and the placement of projects within focus areas (based on biological and partner needs). Collaborating with partners who agree on shared, concise, and consistent objectives may be difficult in practice, but we found this approach to be essential. In an effort to minimize initial workload concerns, a roles and responsibilities document for GRIP was developed, outlining the responsibilities of each partner organization and all personnel. Over time, partners may disagree on various aspects of any program. As such, creating and fostering effective conflict management is vital to the partnership and to the success of the program; the roles and responsibilities document is the primary tool for this purpose. We have also found that relying on multiple partner organizations leads to a better chance for success. We have learned that including multiple partners at every level of the program fosters the communication necessary for a partnership-based program to address issues and opportunities effectively. We left ultimate responsibility and control of the program in the hands of the Joint Venture management board, giving our main partners the final say in program direction.

Simplify. Make the process as easy as possible.

We found that the delivery program should be as simple, seamless, and transparent as possible to ensure acceptance by project managers, biologists, partners, and end-user—private landowners. Unnecessary bureaucracy creates confusion, distrust, and eventually, complacency. A program that is easy to understand and implement in a timely manner stands a greater chance of success than one that gets bogged down in unnecessary processes. For example, project managers who facilitate conservation delivery on the ground appreciate the responsiveness and short feedback times created by open enrollment and swift project reviews. This approach leads to fewer surprise outcomes and disappointed project managers and private landowners, which in turn fosters partner enthusiasm and generates constituent interest and participation. Even in the best-case scenario, not all partners and not every landowner will be or stay motivated and adjustments may be required.

Create focus areas.

More often than not, resources (e.g., staff, budget, time) are limited. As such, finding strategies to prevent the dilution of conservation actions is key to a successful program. One method that we found useful was to concentrate partner efforts in specific geographies. The creation of focus areas allowed us to concentrate resources and increase the probability of effecting meaningful change. We found that focus area selection needed to be driven by science through species-specific habitat models derived from incorporating species population and habitat objectives, while considering the location of existing, motivated partner delivery staff. We wanted to avoid working in areas with little chance of success, such as those with poor existing habitat conditions, low delivery staff capacity, or few resources. Types of resources considered include prescribed burn trailers, native seed drills, native seed availability, contractors, and presence of active landowner-led prescribed burn associations and wildlife cooperatives. We discovered that accounting for available resources helped shape specific geographies more likely to achieve habitat objectives. We also created Local Initiative Teams (LITs) for each focus area to address regional differences among practitioners and landscapes. These teams were able to direct funding toward the practices believed to be most beneficial for a specific focus area. Creating LITs also helped organize partner staff and generate excitement for the program. We wanted to avoid making the entire OPJV geography a priority, because we felt that when everything is a priority, then nothing is a priority.

Track progress at the same scale as conservation delivery.

As with any good study design, we believed that measurable objectives should be identified before program implementation and included in goal development. We developed measurable objectives and a monitoring plan that occurred at the same temporal and spatial scale as the program to quantify success and estimate project effectiveness. We believed that this monitoring plan helped increase potential partner buy-in and funder interest. Our monitoring plan included a data storage plan to avoid issues with interagency cooperation. Our data storage included a plan for management of project information that could be used to supplement the monitoring plan and may become essential for development of future research projects and reporting.

Maintain flexibility.

Listening to project managers and local landowners was essential to maintain support and grow our programs. Provided that the habitat delivery objectives are being addressed, how the practice is applied is less important than whether it is applied. We found that by allowing for flexible preferred practice delivery methods and then tailoring the program to fit those methods, we were able to improve participation by project managers. In our diverse partnership, other organizations may have programs better suited for certain practices or properties. We believe that effective conservation

delivery is knowing not only your program, but also other partners' programs. Then we were able to connect private landowners to the most appropriate funding partner or source. We were constantly looking for win-win scenarios in which a private landowner meets their management objectives and the project results in more hectares of restored or enhanced habitat for wildlife species like northern bobwhite and other grassland birds.

Spend grant funding in a timely manner.

Applying for a mixture of private, corporate, state, and federal funding sources ultimately put more dollars on the ground by leveraging non-federal funds to meet funder match requirements. GRIP was able to use private funds for projects requiring a short lead time and for practices that many traditional conservation funding sources were unlikely to support, such as prescribed fire. Despite this, we found that using multiple fund sources can allow for open enrollment periods as overlapping grants can help to ensure that incentive funds are constantly available, reducing frustration among project managers and private landowners. Benefits of a program with multiple funding streams include flexibility and durability; in other words, we could choose how to pay for a given project and we could keep funds flowing through time with no breaks in availability.

Grant organizations want to see quick results for their investment. A grant recipient's failure to meet stated objectives or spend funds in allotted time frames can reduce an organization's desire to fund, or more importantly, renew program support. Conservation projects often suffer from delays in implementation due to weather and unanticipated factors. To avoid grant extensions or having to return unspent funds, we set internal deadlines well before grant expiration dates to have money tied to projects. By employing this method, we have avoided use-it-or-lose-it project selection scenarios, which if followed, often result in hastily designed, poor quality projects. We found open- or rolling-enrollment creates flexibility in choosing good projects as they are submitted and increases the likelihood of spending grant funds in a timely manner.

Invest time and money into training, equipping, and supporting private lands staff.

Positive relationships with private landowners are vital for delivering high quality projects in private-lands wildlife management. Personal relationships take time and deliberate attention to develop. Often, new employees are not from the local area and may need to learn about local conservation challenges, strengths, and opportunities. They may have very different backgrounds than their potential clients (private landowners and partner biologists) and these differences may take time and effort to overcome. Partner staff members are likely to rely on more experienced practitioners to help develop their own style and knowledge base for working with private landowners, and we found that having available

partner staff to mentor new biologists has been helpful. New conservationists need to become competent and confident, and to feel that they belong before they are likely to become top performers. Further, each person is different and is likely to require customized on-boarding and training plans. We found that it is imperative to invest significant time and energy, sometimes for ≥ 2 years, to help new biologists feel a sense of belonging in the partnership. Constant outreach and communication are needed, such as making sure that they are invited to all local and regional partner meetings and are provided with introductions to landowners with existing projects in the area. Ensuring that multiple partner organizations, and especially new biologists, are included in landowner visits will also foster a sense of cooperation and build consistency in project development. In the absence of mentorship or a sense of belonging in the partnership, new biologists have had a hard time flourishing.

In our case, we had staff employed by multiple organizations who worked for the partnership as a single team. This arrangement meant that they had a supervisor in one organization who had certain human resources responsibilities, and another supervisor who served as the day-to-day leader and had mentorship responsibilities. However, when all partners shared and accepted the developmental roles that they may play (especially leadership and mentorship), we saw that new team members were very successful. Because we had staff employed by several organizations serving on one OPJV team, our delivery staff positions are in itself a partnership. Leaders from the participating organizations need to be in regular and meaningful communication in order to provide appropriate feedback.

Finally, we found that conservation staff members were likely to be more effective if stationed within or close to focus areas to address local conservation objectives. However, since they were often transplants to the area, this arrangement often put them in unfamiliar areas or rural areas that may have made them feel like being on an island. We believe these situations are where the strength of partnership becomes invaluable. Partners can help connect new employees to other conservation practitioners across organizations and agencies within their area. We found that when partners facilitated the establishment of connections for new employees, these networks would in turn connect new employees to private landowners and community leaders who have a history of being early adopters of programs and who are trusted for the conservation choices they make. This strategic and collaborative approach can greatly accelerate program effectiveness.

Don't try to micromanage for a hidden agenda.

As conservation professionals, we viewed it as our job to be an advocate for the resource(s) (e.g., grassland birds, northern bobwhite, grassland habitat) first, and for the private landowners second. We recognized that it was often too easy to start pushing programs because of deadlines, hectare goals, and expiring grant funds, or providing only what the

landowner asked for without proper regard for the resource objectives. We can easily become narrowly focused about what programs our particular organization offers, as opposed to all opportunities, resources, and programs available in certain areas for the best management and conservation of a species or habitat type. The lesson here is to be diligent about achieving program objectives.

Working together across organizations, as well as within, opens many avenues for partnerships, collaboration, interagency trainings, and overall increased success with directed species and habitat conservation. In a partnership, we find it vital to be honest and transparent about partnership activities, to be open to sharing information and resources with partners, and to operate within the predetermined shared objectives of the overall mission. In the case of a sizable program such as GRIP, it is unlikely that our core OPJV team will ever be able to effectively work with all interested private landowners, or achieve the necessary landscape-level objectives by ourselves. We must rely on the power of the partnership and transparent communication to meet our broad objectives effectively and efficiently.

Don't ignore the social aspects of a successful program.

As mentioned earlier, our OPJV partners and landowners worked at the "speed of trust," which is slow to build and easily lost. We found that building trust within a local community took about 1–2 years for driven biologists. Using proven methods of spending time in the field with both experienced partner biologists and respected landowners is an important first step for new staff to gain confidence. We think that partners that have invested time and resources to develop and nurture both landowner leaders and confident field-level biologist mentors will observe greater dividends when new staff members are learning how to effectively deliver programs and conservation concepts.

Once a biologist knocks on enough doors, sits at enough kitchen tables, and becomes a regular at the local café, the demand for the biologist's technical assistance and program financial assistance can be expected to eventually reach a desired level. In addition, there is evidence to suggest that Texas landowners and land managers are more likely to participate in conservation programs that maximize cost-share ($\geq 50\%$) and minimize labor inputs (≤ 30 days/year) and that certain types of landowners may be reached through strategic marketing and communication efforts (Valdez et al. 2019). Reaching out to and supporting local landowner cooperatives may be important since this may be where information is locally exchanged and new ideas potentially embraced. Once neighbors begin to see positive impacts in the fields and pastures of trusted early adopters, program acceptance and use often accelerate. The OPJV has worked diligently to encourage early adopters among private lands biologists and private landowners, and publicly recognize efforts when possible.

MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

The partners of the Oaks and Prairies Joint Venture have worked at implementing the tiered-delivery vision of the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative's Coordinated Implementation Program for the past decade. We feel our efforts are starting to pay off, but there is much work remaining to be done. We made some mistakes and tried to incorporate the lessons that we learned into successive iterations of our conservation delivery programs. The Grassland Restoration Incentive Program concept has been adopted in at least 3 other Migratory Bird Habitat Joint Ventures across the Great Plains, and most are within the existing northern bobwhite range. As efforts ramp up to address grassland bird population losses, we hope that some of the lessons we have learned will help others set up additional successful regional programs.

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