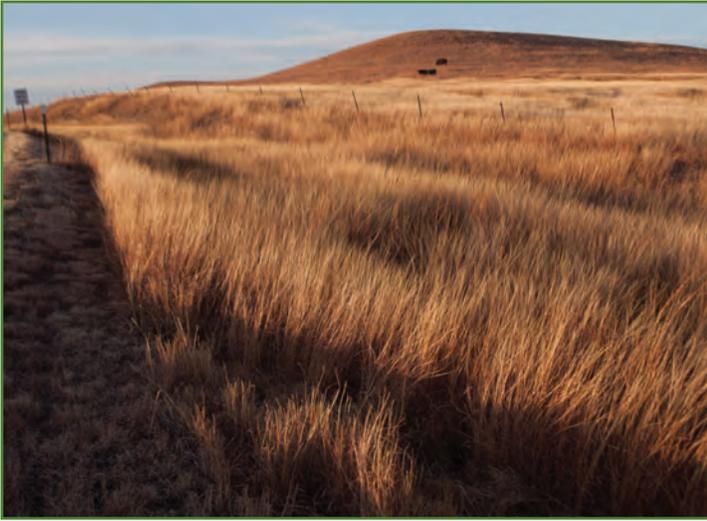


# Perseverance & Partnerships Critical to the Challenge Emerging from OWB's Threat to Prairies



*Caucasian Bluestem along a PT County roadside, also taking over adjacent Tallgrass Prairie rangeland. This OWB has eliminated all other plants in the roadside, and is the lighter colored grass in the pasture.*

**A**chievements of major conservation goals invariably take years, often decades. Prospects for success are always enhanced with partnerships. That is the road ahead for the invasive Old World Bluestems (OWB) threat.

Audubon of Kansas (AOK) has recognized the ominous presence and called attention to the explosive expansion of Yellow and Caucasian Bluestems along roadsides for more than a decade. Although a few individuals had expressed concern, the need for local and state agencies to address the threat hadn't—and still hasn't—caught fire.

Then, last year a local activist, a prairie conservation enthusiast with a 21<sup>st</sup> century *Joan of Arc* commitment, dropped by our office to ask for help.

Margy Stewart and some of her neighboring landowners in Wingfield Township of Geary County had taken matters into their own hands. They spot-sprayed glyphosate on patches of Caucasian Bluestem along a county road. In some areas, the infestations had already crossed the fence and were moving into prairie pastures. All of the landowners cooperated to nip the problem in the bud. They did what could be done in one year. However, they all knew that follow-up would be necessary. So Margy appealed to Geary County for help with future monitoring and control. That's when the wrath of uninformed agency staff came down on the grassroots initiative. A couple county officials took it upon themselves to berate Margy and threaten her with various sanctions if she and her neighbors did not desist. Of course, desisting was just what the Wingfield people were asking, as long as the County took over control of OWB. But some officials were adamant that Geary County would not control OWB. They even circulated a letter asserting that efforts to control OWB were pointless at best and caused more erosion at worst.

However, the real decision-makers, the County Commissioners, were not so sure. They wanted more information. Margy asked AOK for help in providing factual information. We met with the commissioners and provided an overview of our concerns. We also explained that because these grasses are toxic to other plants, they kill off more deeply-rooted plants and create areas of bare soil between clumps—making the rights-of-way **MORE** vulnerable to erosion.

Margy's appeal came after I had heard similar requests from a Wabaunsee County rancher and later a Greenwood County rancher at a Tallgrass Legacy Alliance meeting concerned about OWB on roadsides in those areas. It was clear that an educational workshop would meet an urgent need. OWB are grasses, and most people do not recognize them as they invade grassland landscapes across Kansas. Audubon of Kansas, together with the Kansas Wildlife Federation (KWF), Protect the Flint Hills, Kansas Native Plant Society, Kansas Land Trust, Grassland Heritage Foundation, Prairie Heritage, Inc., and Bird Runner Wildlife Refuge, planned a workshop for April 27, 2015.

Advanced registrations quickly overwhelmed the capacity of the community center we had reserved, so we moved the workshop to the historic barn at Konza Prairie. The workshop relied on the expertise of Karen Hickman, Natural Resource Ecology and Management professor at OSU and the country's foremost authority on OWB; Mitchell Greer at Fort Hays State; and Keith Harmony at the Ag Research Center at Hays. Their presentations were research-based, detailed, and substantive. DVDs of the presentations are available and a link for the full length of the workshop is posted on the AOK website.

Donna Sullivan, editor of *Grass & Grain*, was in attendance and she devoted the front page of the May 5 edition to provide a detailed account. Thus, nearly ten thousand readers were exposed to the fact that "Old World Bluestems Threaten Native Grasslands."

With the need for more coverage in central and western Kansas, two more OWB workshops were held in September, in Hays and Greensburg, with KWF taking the sponsorship lead.

During media outreach for those workshops, I urged Michael Pearce, the *Wichita Eagle's* Outdoor Editor, to take a look at the OWB threat to native grasslands and wildlife. He produced an exceptional feature article that appeared on the front page of the Sunday, October 18, 2015 edition. Importantly, as a result of his article, many people who own native range, hay meadows and pastures will now recognize OWB and begin to

**Get up tomorrow early in the morning, and earlier than you did today, and do the best that you can.** —Jeanne d'Arc

pursue plans to control it. As Michael mentioned, he didn't notice it before, but now sees it everywhere he travels.

Where do we go from here? The challenge to deal with these invaders gets greater every year, as OWB are being spread along roadsides. They may be on the verge of expanding exponentially—and taking over entire rangeland landscapes as they have in parts of western Oklahoma and Texas. In many areas in Kansas it is obvious that roadside-mowing operations spread OWB for miles and private hay removal from roadsides takes it to the heart of our state's native rangelands.

As Greenwood County rancher Bill Browning included in an October 22 statement to the legislative committee considering revisions to noxious weed statutes, "...wherever (infested hay from roadsides) is fed to cattle, the metastasis of this exotic will occur. This practice must be stopped." OWB can also be seen spreading into pastures adjacent to highways at hundreds—or thousands—of locations. For a number of reasons it is usually the last thing cattle want to eat in native range.

OWB negatively impact wildlife and dramatically diminish the biodiversity of grasslands.

If left unchecked, OWB may eventually cost ranchers tens of millions of dollars collectively to control as they try to save native rangelands. If uncontrolled, infested grasslands will substantially reduce profitability for cattle producers.

As crazy as it sounds, OWB got their boost in the Great Plains when agronomists in USDA Plant Materials Centers

**“When you go back and look at American history.... If you weren't selfreliant on the prairie, you wouldn't survive.”**

**—Alan Greenspan**

(most notably the one at Woodward, Oklahoma) developed OWB seed and released it. An OSU extension official promoted them, and NRCS approved them for use in OK and TX for CRP plantings. *Too bad the individuals responsible won't be covering the cost of control. Alternatively, USDA should make control an Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) priority and provide other assistance, and the Kansas Department of Transportation (KDOT) should eliminate non-essential mowing to redirect funds to control OWB.*

We can help by asking members of the Kansas Legislature to: (1) pass legislation adding Caucasian and Yellow Bluestems to the Noxious Weed list; (2) direct KDOT to develop and implement a comprehensive plan for timely control of these two invasives on highway rights-of-way and prohibit haying and removal of hay from any roadside areas infested with OWB; and (3) direct other state and county agencies to address this threat on lands they administer. Nebraska and other states north of Oklahoma should do the same before OWB become ubiquitous.

—Ron Klataske



Top photo, a May view of an OWB-infested roadside following a spring burn, showing bare areas between clumps--and erosion. Lower photo, the same roadside in September illustrating the dominance of OWB--and the near total elimination of native plants.



Private haying and removal of contaminated hay from highway roadsides has become a vector for spreading of OWB.

Ron Klataske photos