

# Tennessee Grasslands Coalition

15 August 2022

To: Tennessee Fish and Wildlife Commission  
From: Tennessee Grasslands Coalition Non-governmental Organizations

Re: Grassland restoration on TWRA Wildlife Management Areas

Dear Members of the Tennessee Fish and Wildlife Commission,

Today we write to you to voice our collective and unwavering support for grassland restoration and management on the public lands owned by TWRA via its statewide system of wildlife management areas. The undersigned groups strongly support TWRA taking proactive measures to restore grasslands on WMAs, especially where the restoration of this vegetation type exists as a strategy and focus for wildlife restoration. Grassland obligate song and game birds, as well as pollinators and other mammals require these efforts, and this work is highly relevant to and consistent with TWRA's mission.

Over the past several years, the importance of native prairies and grasslands have been of growing interest among hunters and other conservationists. Once covering over 7,000,000 acres, native grasslands were a dominant and important vegetation type in Tennessee, supporting numerous songbird and game bird species, bison, elk, and other wildlife. Today, Tennessee holds less than 50,000 acres of this critical habitat type in a total of four to five areas statewide, the largest of which are located on Department of Defense properties. Globally, grasslands rank as one of the most imperiled habitat types.

Why should we care about grasslands? Given their scarcity, it follows that many birds and other wildlife dependent on them are not doing well. This sets the stage for species being listed as threatened or endangered, which in turn sets the stage for very strong regulatory impacts (e.g., the federal Endangered Species Act) that take management control away from relevant state agencies, and place this control in the hands of federal regulators. Thus, there is a strong incentive to maintain state management control over these species to avoid these outcomes.

Additionally, research is showing that native grasses can be used as an important private rangeland improvement component that benefits wildlife and livestock production. While these native grass pastures may not be exactly like reconstructed or restored native prairies, they are proving to be important areas that benefit wildlife, and economically benefit landowners.

There are three broad areas where grasslands restoration can be encouraged. They are (a) through improved public lands management, (b) through better private forestlands management (i.e., woodlands and savannas), and (c) through private rangeland improvement. Efforts are already underway to take advantage of public lands opportunities for grassland restoration, and initial results have proved to be outstanding, making the argument for more of this type of management.

In conducting this work, we ask that the agency reaffirm its existing partnerships and continue to work collaboratively with them to strengthen this overall effort. For example, Tennessee is blessed to be home to several grasslands experts. The Southeastern Grasslands Initiative is located at Austin Peay University, and run by Dr. Dwayne Estes. Similarly, the Center for Native Grasslands Management is located at the University of Tennessee, and is run by Dr. Pat Keyser. Additionally, TDEC and TWRA also possess knowledgeable staff and resources to work on grassland restoration. Add to these experts the field efforts of the undersigned organizations, and it is easy to see that there exists strong support for grassland restoration.

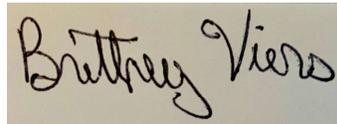
In closing, we respectfully request that the agency continue to build upon the conversations we have had over the past several years and begin implementing management changes to affect grassland restoration. We are aware that grassland restoration, in some cases, will represent a change in past practices (e.g., reductions in row cropping, removing deadfall from storm impacted areas, forest management practices to promote forest savannas, etc.), and that these changes may be met with concern by those benefiting from the status quo. To this end, we request the agency work with our coalition to build strategies that will help address these concerns and better communicate the value and importance of grasslands and their restoration.

Should you have any questions please feel free to contact us at 615-353-1133.

Sincerely,



Mike Butler  
Tennessee Wildlife Federation



Brittney Viers  
Quail Forever



Mark Lance  
Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation



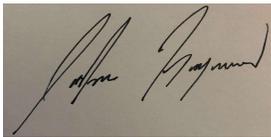
Dr. Dwayne Estes  
Southeastern Grassland Initiative



Andy Edwards  
Pheasants Forever



Nick Biemiller  
Ruffed Grouse Society & American  
Woodcock Society



Josh Kaywood  
Backcountry Hunters and Anglers



Ashley Chance  
Artemis

Cc: Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency  
Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation  
Tennessee Department of Agriculture, Division of Forestry