

## CONSERVATION OF PRAIRIE ECOSYSTEMS IN NORTH AMERICA <sup>TWS</sup>

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This presentation reviews the status and trends of North American prairie, their endemic biota, and sums current, major conservation efforts. The largest vegetative province in North America is the native prairie, and grasses as an integral component of prairies inhabit the continent (and worldwide) in

greater abundance than any other comparable group of plants. Estimates suggest that European settlement declines in native prairie range as high as 99 percent, and the potential for species loss, both plant and animal, is high. More subtle impacts in the loss of prairie, for example, loss of the highly

developed ecotypic differentiation, often go undetected. Endemism is high in prairie given the long evolutionary history of grasslands. Grassland bird species have shown more consistent and steeper, geographically widespread declines than any other grouping in North America; 55 grassland species in the United States are listed as threatened or endangered and one-third of the species considered endangered by the Committee on the Endangered Wildlife in Canada are found on grasslands. Developing ecosystem assessments and conservation strategies are difficult,

given approximately 98 percent of lands historically native prairie are in private ownership. Nevertheless, the first broadscale ecosystem management effort--The Great Plains Initiative--continues with more recent initiatives by the USDA Forest Service, National Biological Survey, and Environmental Protection Agency. Over a half century has passed since Weaver (1954, North American Prairie) noted that the disappearance of a major unit of vegetation--the North American Prairie is an event worthy of recognition if not action.