

# Summary: Prairie Reconstruction Initiative Symposium and Workshop

In January 2016, 146 prairie reconstruction practitioners representing 36 organizations participated in the Prairies from Scratch Symposium held at the Prairie Wetlands Learning Center in Fergus Falls, MN. The Symposium for professional prairie managers and biologists was an opportunity to review efforts of the Prairie Reconstruction Initiative (PRI) during the past three years and foster conversation about prairie reconstruction successes and failures. A two-day workshop followed during which the PRI Advisory Team (PRIAT) developed a plan for the future, incorporating feedback from Symposium participants. The agenda for the [Symposium](#), including links to videos of the sessions, and the agenda for the PRIAT [Workshop](#) have been posted on the Eastern Tallgrass Prairie and Big Rivers Landscape Conservation Cooperative's [website](#).



## Symposium

### *Progress Updates*

The morning session was devoted to a review of the background, purpose and accomplishments of the PRI. Prairie reconstruction is widely practiced throughout the tallgrass and mixed grass prairie region, yet practitioners struggle to achieve

consistent results. Since the initial PRI workshop three years ago, the group has worked to facilitate communication and collaboration among practitioners in order to improve collective learning about techniques that lead to successful reconstructions. For example, Field Days are organized a few times each year at different sites to showcase various aspects of prairie reconstruction. In addition, the PRI has hosted several Webinars on topics of interest, such as the importance of using local ecotype seed.

The Prairie Reconstruction Database is being developed where practitioners will be able to document consistent information about seeding effort, habitat management and monitoring. When the database is complete, we will be able to create data summaries and query the data for quantitative analysis. Ultimately, the database is envisioned as a tool to improve collective learning and inform future management decisions. The PRI plans to field test a prototype of the database in 2016 and have a final version ready in 2017. In a connected study, Diane Larson (USGS and Univ. of MN) shared insights from her Retrospective Analysis of the success of prairie reconstructions based on current vegetation surveys and historical management information at two stations. Diane emphasized that consistent documentation of management actions is essential for this type of analysis. A Literature Review Database is being developed to categorize prairie reconstruction research and to identify knowledge gaps. Although still undergoing refinement, collaborators will eventually be able to query the database to find relevant papers, based on reconstruction techniques or taxa of interest. Another goal of the literature database is to work with researchers to prioritize research targeting the identified information gaps.



### ***Keynote Address***

Scott Weber, who has worked for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and now owns a native plant nursery was the keynote speaker. Scott's experience refutes the concept of prairie succession in which pioneer species are a necessary first step toward a prairie with "better" species. Instead, Scott focuses on species of highest value, while minimizing or excluding opportunistic or aggressive species in seed mixes. This approach, however, requires patience to allow the more desirable (but often slower growing) species to mature. He recommends using mixes of about 75% forbs by weight and relies on fall planting to stimulate germination and survival of forbs. Additionally, to preserve spring flora in plantings, it is essential to not kill them with spring burns, especially during the early establishment phase.



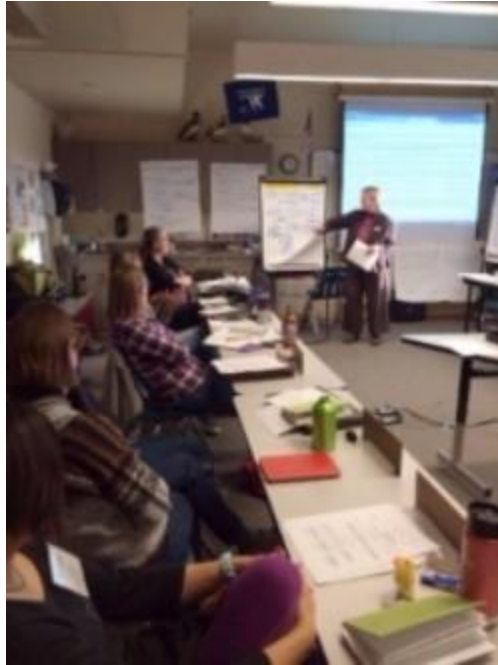
## ***Panel Discussion***

Panelists provided short presentations of their experiences and insights regarding prairie reconstructions, followed by questions and input from the audience. JB Bright spoke about his 13 years of experience with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in MN and corroborated Scott's observations that spring plantings tend to be overrun with grasses. Diane Larson shared insights from an ongoing project about the effects of seed diversity and planting method on invasion of a planting by Canada thistle. Jack Norland spoke about three of his research projects from his 20 years at ND State University and ended with a caution that we will likely never achieve 100% success in our reconstructions due to the complex nature of prairie systems. Finally, Brian Winter shared some of his experiences during 30 years with The Nature Conservancy, stressing the need to develop a good site evaluation and reconstruction plan, including good seed bed preparation, using a seed mix matched to site conditions, choosing an appropriate seeding method, and following up with post-seeding management.

The panelists' presentations were followed by several questions from Symposium participants. For example, in response to a question about how to include goals for pollinators in your seed mixes and management, the panelists recommended including milkweeds for monarchs, especially some of the lesser known native milkweeds in an area (but cautioned against using species not native to the region), and including plenty of nectar sources that will be available throughout the season. In addition, the panelists suggested adopting a patch disturbance regime on a small scale to provide refugia for invertebrates.

## ***Scoping Session***

The Symposium ended with a world-café style scoping session, in which small groups of participants discussed different questions about their information needs and the PRI's future direction. Participants' responses to these questions were discussed the following day during the Advisory Team workshop.



## Workshop

The purpose of the workshop was to meet in person in order to chart a course for the future of the PRI. Based on extensive discussions over the two days and input from the Symposium participants, the Advisory Team decided to:

- Commit to further developing the management and monitoring database
  - Provide a central place to document management actions
  - Construct a user-friendly data entry interface
  - Allow users to create meaningful summaries
- Develop standardized monitoring protocols
  - Promote consistent data collection
  - Develop different levels of monitoring to provide flexibility
- Continue with outreach activities such as field days and webinars
- Enhance communication among prairie reconstruction practitioners
- Develop resources such as a planting guidance tool

Small working groups were organized to address each of these issues, and appropriate timelines were devised. It was further decided that a subgroup would

assess the feasibility of enhancing the literature database, given time and budgetary constraints. The team also agreed that a formal adaptive management study is unrealistic at this time.

Members of the Monarch Joint Venture joined the meeting to discuss the importance of prairie reconstructions to monarchs and other pollinators and to explore possible overlap in monitoring goals.

In addition, the group discussed the value of collaboration among PRI partners and how to overcome both internal and external communication challenges. The Advisory Team will use the workshop discussions as a foundation for building a communication strategy that meets the needs of the PRI.

Finally, the group had extensive discussions about the composition, roles and responsibilities of the Advisory Team and the Leadership Team. To effectively guide further efforts, a working group was put together to develop a document that lays out business rules, organizational structure, roles and expectations for the PRI and its components.

The Advisory Team left Fergus Falls energized to continue working to improve prairie reconstruction practice!

## News and Upcoming Events

The Prairie Reconstruction Initiative Advisory Team respects your time and strives to minimize your email burden. We would like to keep you informed of PRI progress, upcoming events, and learning opportunities through a regular newsletter and occasional notifications of special events.