

Site Steward Handbook

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Overview

The Site Steward Handbook describes the expectations and responsibilities of site stewards for properties owned by The Prairie Enthusiasts (TPE), with most aspects extending to properties with easements and formal land management agreements. The Handbook offers guidance and tools to help Site Stewards accomplish duties.

Wording specific to some easements and land management agreements and situations where the Site Steward and owner of a property subject to easement are the same person may render some portions of what follows less relevant, but adherence to management plans is still expected, and keeping records of volunteer participation and management activities is strongly encouraged on all easement properties.

Duties of the Site Steward

Site Stewards hold primary responsibility for assuring management activities and land uses align with the land management plan. They are also the eyes and ears for The Prairie Enthusiasts. These volunteer positions work with guidance from The Prairie Enthusiasts' organization-wide Land Management Committee, Chapter leadership and Chapter Support staff, and in coordination with a Chapter's land management committee if one exists. Site Stewards assist in the goals of land protection, management, education and research on sites protected by The Prairie Enthusiasts. This assistance is provided through a site or Chapter land management committee, with the Site Steward being on the committee. Tasks that are a required part of Site Steward duties include:

- Assure management of the site aligns with its management plan
- Regular visits to the site (minimum of four times a year for fee title properties; easements may be fewer)
- Report observations from visits as described in the Site Monitoring section below.
- Participate in or lead volunteer workdays, projects and events for the site as much as possible and assign a volunteer to do so if absent. Ensure volunteers/attendees sign in. Track volunteer names, hours, and acquire contact information for new volunteers so that inquiries from chapters or Chapter Support may be fulfilled.
- Keep and archive records of land management practices and their locations, dates, and species added/introduced, and new species observed. One way to do this is to keep a spreadsheet with columns for date, activity, and location (management unit, spatial coordinates, or reference to features on a map).

Additional tasks that may also be a part of Site Steward duties include:

- Develop short-term (perhaps annual) work plans or goals for progress based on the management plan and observations.
- Consider participating in citizen science projects such as eBird and iNaturalist

Site Monitoring

Annual property monitoring is required on sites for which The Prairie Enthusiasts hold fee title or a conservation easement. In general, it is recommended that someone other than the site steward conduct the annual monitoring to provide additional oversight on properties. The site steward is encouraged to join the annual monitoring of the site.

On an informal basis, Site Stewards provide more frequent observations and are encouraged to report the following to Chapter Support:

- General condition of the site, its parking area, and signage if any of these have changed.
- New rare and invasive species (on an annual basis) or significant changes in their populations
- Status and progress of management projects as required for grant-funded projects.
- Illegal use of the site
- Encroachments to the property

Note: Nearly all TPE-owned sites are open to the public, although there are some restrictions and prohibited activities. Details are in the site's land management plan.

Stewards are asked to report problems, but Site Stewards are not responsible for enforcing rules and regulations.

Site Stewards who encounter a situation that is beyond their physical or technical abilities should seek guidance from their chapter. Site Stewards who encounter an illegal activity should leave the area and seek assistance from the relevant authority.

Is Being a Site Steward Right for You?

Consider these factors:

- Alignment. Site stewardship occurs in accordance with an approved land management plan and in collaboration with others.
- Physical abilities. Stewards should be able to walk over uneven terrain, carry up to 30 pounds, communicate with groups of volunteers, and write observational

reports. In cases where the Steward is unable to perform these tasks, they can provide oversight to volunteers and contractors.

- Travel time and accessibility. How far is the site and from the nearest road?
- Site size. The size of sites varies greatly and will impact the time needed for stewardship.
- Site type. Some sites require special clothing or equipment, such as waders.
- Plant identification skills. Stewards need to identify most invasive species and know common prairie and/or oak woodland plants.

Special skills, such as birding and invertebrate identification, can be advantageous on the right site, but not required.

Land Management Plan

Purpose

Prairies, oak savannas and other fire-dependent ecosystems grow and flourish when properly managed. Surviving remnants are often small, isolated patches that require active management.

Properties protected through fee title or conservation easement by The Prairie Enthusiasts are required to have a management plan. Additionally, Chapters may choose to enter a formal Land Management Agreement, which includes an approved land management plan, on properties not owned or eased by The Prairie Enthusiasts (informal agreements do not require a land management plan, although they are encouraged). Chapters are responsible for drafting a plan, in coordination with the TPE Ecologist, using the available template. The Land Management Committee and the Board of Directors approve all plans. Management activities should occur in a manner consistent with management plans, and any deviation from management plans should be approved by The Prairie Enthusiasts Land Management Committee and any relevant chapter land management committee.

Site Steward Role

Site Stewards assure management practices align with the site's management plan. They do so through documenting management work conducted on site. Site Stewards may recommend amendments to the plan based on experience and observations, which would occur with the input, guidance and approval of Chapter leadership, a Chapter's Land Management Committee and the TPE Land Management Committee, and approval by the Board of Directors. Any activity or structure (e.g., benches, soil disturbance,

artwork or signage) that deviates from the approved land management plan should be reviewed and approved by the Land Management Committee prior to its undertaking.

Land Management Policies and Guidelines

Site Stewards are responsible for following all policies and guidelines regarding land management. The following policies and guidelines will be posted on the website under Business, Land Management when approved by the Land Management Committee.

Drafts of guidelines can be attained from the committee if needed prior to approval:

- [Prescribed Burn Policy](#)
- [Chainsaw Use Guidelines](#)
- Herbicide Use Guidelines (draft developed)
- Research Policy (draft developed)
- Inclement Weather Policy (draft developed)
- Incident Policies (drafts developed)
- Trail Camera Use Guidelines (draft developed)
- Best Management Practices (under development)

Chapter-Level Land Management Committee

Purpose

Land management should occur in collaboration with others. Chapter leadership may want to establish one committee for all sites or committees for individual sites. This depends on the size of the Chapter, the number of sites managed, and the size of the sites. Large and complex sites should have a site-specific management committee organized by the Site Steward.

Site Steward Role

The Site Steward may recommend forming a land management committee or an additional committee based on their observations. Site Stewards may be tasked with participating in or leading the committee.

Species Inventory

Purpose

A species inventory is the first step in managing and restoring an ecosystem, involving listing all native and introduced species (grasses, forbs, shrubs) and documenting their abundance or cover to understand the current health and diversity of the plant community. These inventories are essential for determining what is needed to increase diversity, combat invasive species, and effectively manage the prairie through practices like prescribed burning.

Site Steward Role

In the future a species inventory will be included in all management plans, if one is not already included. The Site Steward may be tasked with updating the inventory based on observations they or others make during site visits. In any case, the Site Steward must be familiar with the inventory and document additions or changes for the Chapter. The Site Steward may specifically seek assistance from a botanist, including the TPE Ecologist, to complete species inventories. The Site Steward should ensure that records of lists are properly maintained.

Grants and Other Funding Sources

Purpose

Grants can be an important source of money to facilitate restoration work on sites. Chapter Support staff can find programs that align with management goals. Staff will understand the grant's specific requirements, such as eligible organizations, project focus areas and eligibility criteria.

Site Steward Role

The Site Steward may be asked to contribute to grant application language based on their understanding of the site. Stewards are also encouraged to work with Chapter management committees to develop project ideas and contact Chapter Support with proposal ideas from the Chapter. Doing so during the Chapter's annual planning and budgeting process is ideal, although staff are open to project ideas at any time.

Leading a Field Trip

Site Stewards may be asked by the Chapter to plan and lead field trips at the site. The Field Trip Leader Checklist can be used to support those events. A printable version is available in Appendix A, Field Trip Leader Checklist.

Leading a Workday

Purpose

A primary means for managing sites is to bring volunteers together through workdays to remove invasives, collect seed and conduct prescribed burns. Workdays bring people together from all walks of life and provide opportunities for all to develop personal relationships with local ecosystems in a hands-on way.

Site Steward Role

Site Stewards may be asked by the Chapter to plan and lead volunteer workdays at the site. A sample checklist is available in Appendix B, Volunteer Workday Checklist.

Site Stewards have the authority to prohibit other volunteers from performing tasks that the Site Steward deems the volunteers insufficiently qualified or too reckless to perform. Site stewards should supervise the work of other volunteers to prevent misuse of herbicide or tools and provide constructive feedback when needed.

What do Volunteers Want?

Everyone comes to a work party for their own reasons. Some burn with passion to save our prairies and savannas. But not everyone, so we have to tailor their experience.

Volunteers want to know **why am I here?** To make it more likely they will return, they need to know:

- They are doing something important, and that
- Their presence is appreciated.

Explain why the work on this site is important. Everyone wants to understand *How does my cutting buckthorn for two hours make a difference?*

- Explain the importance of this particular site and the management goals (both long-term and short-term/today's goal).
- Explain how the work on this site contributes to the mission to preserve, protect and maintain native prairies and oak savannas in our region.

- Ensure workday leaders know the site, including prominent features and special things like endangered species.
- Make sure everyone signs the sign-in sheet, which includes a volunteer waiver (suggested template in Appendix C).

Appendix A. Field Trip Leader Checklist¹

On-site pre-trip

- ☐ Check participants for suitable footwear/clothing, sunscreen and insect repellent as needed.

Pre-trip introduction

- ☐ Start the introduction 3-5 minutes after the scheduled start time.
- ☐ Introduce yourself and other leaders (if the group is small, attendees can introduce themselves). Announce hand-out materials (including TPE brochure).
- ☐ Background/introductions: Explain that there will be a brief introduction, but there will be plenty of time during the hike for questions. Give a brief introduction to prairies/savannas - what is a prairie; what is their value; what is TPE. Give a brief introduction to the site - community type; protection status; how it became protected.

Before beginning the hike (reorder these to best fit the trip)

- ☐ Ask for any questions.
- ☐ Ask if any hikers have medical issues of which you should be aware.
- ☐ Announce restroom facilities that might be available.
- ☐ State the approximate hike length (time and distance) and difficulty.
- ☐ Encourage carpooling if traveling from meeting place to site.
- ☐ Take a head-count prior to starting the hike.

Begin hike

- ☐ Keep the group together as much as possible. If possible, have a co-leader stay at back of group. Set a good example by not trampling vegetation or disturbing wildlife.
- ☐ Stop periodically at various locations with something to point out.

¹ Adapted from an Empire-Sauk Chapter document.

- ☐ Focus on what is there but also point out things that are there other times of the year.
- ☐ Tailor conversations to knowledge levels.
- ☐ Try to engage with each attendee at some point during the hike.

Conversation topics

- ☐ Flora ID
- ☐ Fauna ID
- ☐ Special traits of flora
- ☐ Role of fire and grazing in prairie plant communities
- ☐ Management techniques
- ☐ How prairies were lost
- ☐ Role of soil types in prairies

End hike

- ☐ End the trip on time.
- ☐ Take a head count to be sure all attendees are still with the group.
- ☐ Give a concise conclusion and review highlights.
- ☐ Ask for quick questions.
- ☐ Mention upcoming TPE trips/events.
- ☐ Thank participants for coming!
- ☐ Be available for additional conversation
- ☐ Archive or report attendee list as appropriate

Appendix B. Volunteer Workday Checklist²

Prepare for the Workday

Preparation for a workday is key to recruitment and retention of volunteers

- ☐ Make sure the site address is accurate and can easily be entered into a smart phone. A direct Google Maps link is preferred.
- ☐ Make sure a description of the site is on the invitation and why the chapter is working on it (e.g., it is protected, any relationship the Chapter has with the landowner and reasons the Chapter is working on the site).
- ☐ List the needs for appropriate dress (e.g., long pants, workwear that can get holes in them, waders) and personal care items (e.g., water, sunscreen, insect replant).
- ☐ Ensure there is a phone number on the invitation that volunteers can call in the event of bad weather or other questions. Use email for cancelling, if it's possible in a timely way. Make sure someone is monitoring email prior to the event for people who prefer email to phone.
- ☐ Photos of past workdays at the site are good to include in your notices. There is nothing like a strong visual of happy people obviously having fun to inspire attendance.
- ☐ Bring extra equipment such as gloves, chemically resistant gloves, safety glasses, loppers, etc.
- ☐ Consider bringing extra water and snacks, especially if the weather is challenging

On-Site Check

- ☐ Check participants for suitable footwear/clothing as needed.
- ☐ Have everyone sign in (see Appendix C)

Introduction

- ☐ Introduce yourself and other leaders. Allow a few minutes for newcomers to share why they came.

² Adapted from Empire-Sauk Chapter document.

- ☐ Volunteers also want to learn. They want to learn about herbicides - what to apply to different plants, how much to use and the proper technique.
- ☐ They want to learn how to operate equipment - loppers, brush saws, chainsaws and so forth. And, of course, ensure all safety protocols and TPE policies are followed.
- ☐ Give a brief introduction to prairies/savannas and TPE.
- ☐ Give a brief introduction to the site - community type; protection status; how it became protected.

During the Workday

- ☐ Check-in with participants to answer questions and provide additional instruction as needed.
- ☐ Encourage participants to take breaks and drink water as needed. You may schedule a break near the middle of the work period, as well.
- ☐ Point out interesting plants or animals throughout the workday.

Closing the Workday

- ☐ Thank participants for their time and efforts.
- ☐ Provide snacks and refreshments, if you have them.
- ☐ Ask for questions.
- ☐ Allow social time.
- ☐ Pack/recombobulate.

Appendix C. Volunteer Sign-In and Waiver

The Prairie Enthusiasts documents volunteer efforts for several reasons: to provide matching hours on grants, track volunteer engagement over time, document site-specific work and more.

Please use the template provided to ensure successful integration with TPE-wide systems. Steps to track include:

- ☐ On-site volunteer sign-in with media permission and waiver.
- ☐ Update your Chapter's volunteer spreadsheet.
 - Chapters may choose how to divide this work (e.g., each Site Steward does this, one Chapter volunteer does this periodically, etc.)
- ☐ Let Chapter Support staff know you have new information to be integrated into Bloomerang Volunteer (suggested frequency: quarterly).
 - Chapters may choose how to do this (e.g., one Chapter volunteer reports all Chapter volunteer information or Site Stewards each report their respective information)

VOLUNTEER WORK PARTY SIGN-IN AND WAIVER

CHAPTER:	DATE (M/D/Y):	LOCATION:
LEADER:	ACTIVITIES:	

By signing this form, I attest that **1)** I am able to safely participate in the planned activities listed above as an unpaid volunteer. **2)** I acknowledge that many activities pose health or personal injury risks. Hazards may include, but are not limited to, uneven terrain, stumps, biting & stinging insects, ticks, thorny/prickly vegetation, poison ivy, sun exposure, smoke, burning embers, heat, cold, sharp tools, heavy equipment. **3)** If relevant to the activity, I attest that I have appropriate training and experience and have reviewed applicable policy to engage in the use of power equipment or application of herbicides. **I hereby assume these risks and waive any claim (excluding those for intentional and reckless acts) against The Prairie Enthusiasts (TPE) or the landowner and the heirs, legal representatives, successors and assigns of TPE or the landowner due for personal injury to myself. By checking the relevant box below, I and any accompanied children give TPE the right to use photographs or recordings from today ' s activities, which may contain my (and any accompanied child ' s) likeness or voice.**

[illegible]