

# Strategic Plan: 2016-2020



## Great Plains Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit

### Introduction

The Great Plains Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit (CESU), one of 17 regional CESU's in the United States, is a network of 20 academic institutions and one NGO in the Great Plains region and 12 federal agencies. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln serves as host to the Great Plains CESU, which was established in October 2000. In May 2015, the CESU network renewed the University of Nebraska-Lincoln as the host for 2015-2020. The 'heart' of the GP-CESU is the guiding Cooperative Agreement that establishes simple and relatively quick funding mechanisms between federal agency partners and academic institution partners.

The unit encompasses a broad geographical portion of the Great Plains and offers an outstanding group of biological, physical, social, and cultural scientists for collaborative research, technical assistance and educational opportunities in the CESU. Since the Great Plains CESU's inception, offices have been housed in the School of Natural Resources. A National Park Service Research Coordinator has traditionally been placed with the Great Plains CESU. The Director of the Great Plains CESU has been a regular faculty member in the School of Natural Resources with some administrative capacity (i.e., research center director or associate director) or history of administrative experience.

As a part of the national network of CESUs, the Great Plains CESU works to accomplish national level objectives:

- provide usable knowledge to support informed decision making;
- ensure the independence and objectivity of research;
- create and maintain effective partnerships among the federal agencies and universities to share resources and expertise;
- take full advantage of university resources while benefiting faculty and students;
- encourage professional development of current and future federal scientists, resource managers, and environmental leaders; and
- manage federal resources effectively.

### Great Plains CESU Vision Statement

*Effective use and conservation of natural and cultural resources in the Great Plains*

### Great Plains CESU Mission Statement

*The Great Plains CESU supports partnerships for research, education, and training focused on the ecological and cultural resources found on public lands within the Great Plains Region in the context of an agricultural landscape.*

**Context and external environments:** To be successful, the Great Plains CESU must also recognize the unique opportunities and context within which we must work. An analysis and assessment of both the external and internal environments of our region is necessary to most effectively help us develop feasible goals, specific to our region, to achieve our vision and mission.

Relative to other CESU regions, the Great Plains CESU has the potential to suffer a challenge of geography—the Great Plains is a geographic region that has some of the highest proportions of private land in the United States. As a result, the land area for public lands administered by federal agencies is often less than 5% of each member state in the Great Plains CESU, which affects funding and activity levels. Our goals and accomplishments are set in this context, but these constraints are also an opportunity for engaging in more interdisciplinary and innovative projects that work towards common goals that enhance both the conservation of natural and cultural resources and the continued productivity of working agricultural lands.

**Internal environment:** During the period of the 2010-2015 agreement, operating funds for the Great Plains CESU from the initial member fees for federal partners had largely disappeared, because no schedule for new support dollars was in place from the CESU network. The position of administrative assistant in the Great Plains CESU was eliminated because of lack of funds for salary early in the period served by the 2010 CESU funding agreement. The CESU operated on minimal funds provided by DOD (joined late in the 2005-2009 agreement period) and Farm Service Agency (joined during the 2010 agreement period). In addition, the National Park Service provided some critical, sporadic base funding to keep basic operations and travel in place.

Dr. Larkin Powell became the Director of the Great Plains CESU in 2011. UNL has a history of using faculty with some administrative experience to lead the Great Plains CESU, and Larkin has a full set of responsibilities as a research/teaching faculty member in the School of Natural Resources (50% teaching/50% research). In September 2014, the Institute of Natural Resources (IANR) of UNL announced that they were supportive of a CESU-support proposal from Dr. Powell and the Director of the School of Natural Resources, Dr. John Carroll. IANR is providing, for a trial period of three years, a \$4,000/year administrative stipend for the CESU Director, \$10,000/year to hire an adjunct faculty member to teach one of the CESU Director's courses, and \$15,000/year to support an office assistant for the Great Plains CESU. Further, in December of 2014, the CESU National System announced changes to host support that will improve the functionality of the CESU host universities by adding continual base support.

In February 2015, Dr. Tanya Shenk began her role as Research Coordinator in the Great Plains CESU. Kat Bickert was hired as office support in September 2015 with the funds provided by IANR at UNL. Thus, the Great Plains CESU is now fully staffed, and emerging from a period in which the functions of record-keeping, proactive work to stimulate research projects among partners, and the management of annual meetings were abandoned to allow focus on the basic functions required to keep the Great Plains CESU at a minimally functional level. Despite the inability to work proactively during the 2010-2015 agreement period, the Great Plains CESU has marked several impressive accomplishments. The 2010 CESU Agreement was amended four times to add 4 new non-federal partners: Oklahoma State University, University of Nebraska Medical Center, Texas Tech University, and our first NGO—World Wildlife Fund: Northern Great Plains. Three new federal partners have recently joined: USDA FSA, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and NOAA.

## Strategies and Goals for 2016-2020

Our Strategic Plan is based on analysis and assessment of the external and internal environments that control and define possible actions, and our vision and mission within the context of the

Objectives of the CESU network. In addition, during 2016-2020, the Great Plains CESU will be able to establish a more proactive agenda because of support that is now available.

***Our goals include:***

- 1) Formally integrate our Manager's Committee (contacts with the federal agencies) into the continued development of the CESU through input, feedback and collaboration.
- 2) Seek opportunities to develop and apply a multi-partner, thematic approach for natural resource conservation in the context of our agricultural landscape to bring together scientists at university partners throughout the region to solve problems bigger than individual contracts with local public land areas.
- 3) Find ways to reward excellence in graduate students who are trained through CESU projects.
- 4) Develop partnerships with Tribal colleges.
- 5) Continue to improve communication tools to inform federal agencies, universities and NGOs of the opportunities available through the national CESU network.
- 6) Continue to facilitate impactful projects related to inventory and research for natural and cultural resources as well as technical assistance projects.
- 7) Continue to publically document and record the activities and accomplishments of the Great Plains CESU.

***To accomplish these goals, we have proposed the following strategies:***

- 1) Develop a schedule for communication with the Manager's Committee.
- 2) Partner with other CESUs in the region as questions of regional importance emerge, and dedicate portions of the Director's time to such activities.
- 3) Establish a Great Plains CESU Graduate Student Research Award.
- 4) Work with our new federal partner, Bureau of Indian Affairs, to identify opportunities for partnerships with Tribal colleges.
- 5) Partner with regional conferences and/or workshops to host Annual Meetings that can be attended by partners.
- 6) Further develop our new, web-based, public database of CESU-facilitated projects, and request information on projects from federal partners on an annual basis.