

Loess Hills: Alliance hopes to create national reserve

FROM PAGE 1

The Loess Hills are a 650,000 acre landform of windblown silt hills that line Iowa's western border.

The hills run through seven counties, from the "north shores" of Plymouth County down to Fremont County at the Missouri border, said Richard Pope, program coordinator at Iowa State University Harrison County Extension.

They are filled with grasslands and prairie, used by farmers and ranchers, and are a habitat for unique flora and fauna.

The Loess Hills Alliance was established by the Iowa Legislature in 1999 to protect and promote the region through cost-shared tree clearing, controlled burning and invasive species management, as well as grant disbursement to conservation organizations interested in land acquisition.

The alliance consists of representatives from each of the seven counties that contain the Loess Hills.

These representatives include county supervisors, individuals acting on behalf of business and conservation associations and staff from the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.

Susanne Hickey, director of Iowa conservation programs at The Nature Conservancy, said the NPS determined the Loess Hills were "nationally significant" in 2002.

She said making the



(SENTINEL PHOTO BY BENNET GOLDSTEIN)

Susanne Hickey, director of Iowa conservation programs at The Nature Conservancy, spoke to a crowd of 20 about a proposal to establish a national reserve in the Loess Hills region. To purchase this photo, log on to www.lemarssentinel.com.

land a national park is impractical because 95 percent of the land is privately owned.

One alternative, Hickey noted, is to create a national reserve.

To protect reserve lands, the Loess Hills Alliance would work with private landowners and establish a voluntary conservation easement program.

An easement would perpetually prevent the use of the land for certain activities, such as housing development or mining.

This would allow willing sellers to sell certain property rights, but maintain ownership.

"If they don't want to participate, they don't participate," Hickey said.

A NPS representative would advise the Loess Hills Alliance, but no land in the reserve would be purchased by the federal government.

Additionally, no private property on the

reserve would be subject to federal or NPS regulations.

"There's not a park service ranger that's running around, or a supervisor," Hickey said.

The land would continue to be regulated by county ordinances and tax codes.

Hickey said the NPS reserve system has been successful in areas with similar features to the Loess Hills, both in their geologic size and presence of agriculture.

"What's really attractive to us is that these reserves can be tailored to the needs and the interests of the region that's designated," she said.

Making the Loess Hills a national reserve provides greater opportunities for managing and protecting the region's natural resources, Hickey explained.

The benefits would include access to grants only available to NPS affiliated land, which

could be used to purchase additional easements.

"We (Loess Hills Alliance) have a number of landowners that would like to sell conservation easements," Hickey said. "We're able to support that to a certain degree, but we have more landowners than we have funding available."

Hickey also said the increased marketing opportunities available to the reserve could promote tourism.

She said \$650 million came to the region from 2012 through tourism, and this number could increase through the reserve's affiliation with the national park system.

"Right now we market to a six state area," she said. "We feel that [by] marketing some more, we may be able to increase that and really provide some support to the small businesses in the communities that we have."

At the forum, Jon Nylen, of Sioux City, asked what effects placing a conservation easement on private property

would have.

"I would guess that permanently devalues the property to an extent," Nylen said.

Hickey said this was correct because a conservation easement typically means the owner sells the rights to use his or her land for development.

"You're selling those rights, and they do have value," Hickey said.

Grazing rights are often preserved because they are compatible with land conservation, she added.

Hickey noted that livestock farming on pastureland is an important part of the region's economy.

By establishing a loess reserve, the Loess Hills Alliance would gain NPS support for conservation programs that can help farmers.

For example, the NPS can assist with controlled burns, which helps farmers prevent soil erosion and preserve pastures.

Nylen also questioned whether the NPS could be relied upon as a steady source of financial support.

"Is the federal funding — is that perpetual, renewable or fairly secure, or is that something [subject] to the political whims of Congress?" he asked.

Hickey said financial support does vary from year to year, but receiving a national designation would elevate the proposed Loess Hills National Reserve and make it eligible for grants only given to NPS affiliated land.

Pope said alliance members plan to host forums to gather input in all seven counties where the Loess Hills are located.

The final forum is Monday in Harrison County.

Alliance members will deliver forum feedback to Iowa officials, and Gov. Terry Branstad will decide whether to recommend the proposal to Iowa's congressional delegates.

Congress and the President will be responsible for approving legislation that would establish the Loess Hills National Reserve.

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