

Source: John Briggs 785-532-0140, jbriggs1@k-state.edu

Photo available. Contact media@k-state.edu or 785-532-6415.

News release prepared by: Stephanie Jacques, 785-532-0101, sjacques@k-state.edu

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ECOLOGIST RETURNS TO K-STATE AS NEW DIRECTOR OF THE KONZA PRAIRIE BIOLOGICAL STATION

MANHATTAN — The allure of the tallgrass prairie is nothing new to Kansas native John Briggs, the new director of the Konza Prairie Biological Station and professor of biology at Kansas State University.

In fact, Briggs finds the prairie addicting. "It just gets into you," he said.

Briggs was hired as the first nationally recruited director of the Konza Prairie Biological Station. He started June 16. He first began his career at K-State as the data manager for the Long-Term Ecological Research program on Konza in 1984, later gaining promotion to research professor in the Division of Biology. He also served as program officer for ecology at the National Science Foundation. Even though he accepted a professorship at Arizona State University in 1999, he was periodically drawn back to the Konza through his research in ecology.

"I felt like I had the best of both worlds. I could continue to do research at this wonderful place, Konza, while also living and doing research in Arizona," Briggs said. "But when I saw the Konza director's job description and talked to some folks about it, I knew I had to apply for it."

Konza Prairie was first developed as an ecological research site in 1971 under the leadership of Lloyd Hulbert, an ecology professor at K-State. Jointly owned by the Nature Conservancy and K-State, and managed by the Division of Biology, the Konza Prairie currently spans about 8,600 acres, with 93 percent of the prairie having never been plowed. The station is host to 130 registered research projects by 150 scientists from all over the world and is one of the National Science Foundation's Long-Term Ecological Research sites.

"Probably one of the beauties of Konza is it's not just a preserve, it's a research area. If we wanted to just preserve it, it'd be the easiest thing. We'd just burn it one way, graze it very lightly and it would be this wonderful piece of prairie," Briggs said. "The challenge, but also the excitement for me, is to balance our research goals with preservation. I want to preserve native tallgrass prairie habitat, but I also want to conduct experiments and sometimes those things create conflict, so we have to balance the need of different activities."

In addition to balancing research and conservation, Briggs is interested in maintaining a strong educational component at Konza. The possibility of building an education center to house students on field trips may be in the future, if funding permits. A proposal to the U.S. Congress, called the National Ecological Observatory Network, includes Konza Prairie as a candidate core site for implementing a major new national research and

educational program. The educational program will translate scientific data into information that is easier for teachers and the public to understand.

"Tallgrass prairie is one of the most endangered ecosystems in North America. People come from other places and they are just amazed by it. We have the responsibility to maintain that," Briggs said.

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