

Tallgrass Prairie cleanup under way

By Ron Jenkins,
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As part of an ongoing cleanup program, the Oklahoma Energy Resources Board is restoring 13 acres in the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in Osage County, the birthplace of the oil industry in the state.

"We are thrilled to help restore one of this nation's treasures," said Mike Terry, resources board director.

He said his agency's eventual goal is to restore hundreds of saltwater-scarred sites in the 38,000-acre preserve, which stretches from northern Oklahoma through central Kansas. Saltwater from underground pockets is a byproduct of oil drilling and can be hazardous to plants and wildlife.

The preserve is owned by the Nature Conservancy, a non-profit conservation organization created in 1986.

The resources board's restoration project is at an eight-decade-old site near Pawhuska that was used for oil production and storage.

Restoration activities include burying concrete, reshaping land and adding dry organic sludge to break down the saltwater and promote re-vegetation.

The resources board was created by the Oklahoma Legislature in 1993 and is funded through a voluntary one-tenth of 1 percent assessment on oil and natural gas producers and royalty owners.

It has cleaned up more than 6,000 abandoned well sites since 1995 in 59 of the state's 77 counties and plans to spend more than \$4 million this year on about 1,000 restoration projects, Terry said.

"We are cleaning up everything that comes in the door as fast as we can," he said.

State officials stressed the significance of the cleanup in the



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Bison go about their business as a front-end loader works on an old oil well site in the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve near Pawhuska. It's part of the Oklahoma Energy Resources Board's 10-year cleanup program.

Tallgrass Prairie, the largest protected remnant of tallgrass in the country.

Miles Tolbert, Oklahoma's environment secretary, said the preserve is one of the largest ecosystems in the country, "but that empire of grass is floating on a sea of oil."

He said the resources board program had done much in a short time to tackle the problem of thousands of abandoned well sites but much needs to be done to recover from the oil boom at the turn of the century when "we made a pin cushion out of this state."