

March, 2022

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
United States Secretary of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave. S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

On behalf of the [Central Grasslands Roadmap](#) effort we would like to elevate our perspective regarding the importance of conserving our Nation's grasslands. The Central Grasslands Roadmap is a **collaborative effort** to increase conservation of North America's Central Grasslands, which span more than 600 million acres across Canada, the United States, and Mexico including more than 20 million acres of Indigenous lands. By bringing together these three countries and eight diverse sectors (Indigenous/First Nations, Federal agencies, provincial and state-level agencies, private sector and industry, ranchers and producers, academia, NGOs, and funders), *the Roadmap has identified collaborative priorities with a clear destination for the next 10 years and a commitment to these goals while measuring our collaborative progress to ensure resilient grasslands for the future.*

The diverse community that makes up the Central Grasslands Roadmap believes policies should be informed by science (both social and biological), promote outcome-based conservation and local flexibility, and engage community stakeholders (including owners and stewards of land and water) in designing strategies and programs to secure the wildlife, natural resources and agricultural production of the Great Plains for future generations. Moreover, in a region with a long history and where lands are predominantly Native nation or privately managed, policies should honor and reflect Native nation sovereignty, traditional knowledge and cultural values; self-determination and food sovereignty; private property rights; and the history and resilience of multi-generational landowner families and agricultural and rural communities.

The Central Grasslands are core to our natural and cultural heritage. Eighty percent is privately owned and two-thirds of this region is considered in a cultivated or degraded state. Communities are running out of water. One in four of our North America's three billion birds lost over the last 50 years are grassland birds and native pollinators are experiencing similar population trajectories. However, the remaining intact one-third of this region hosts grassland habitat that supports a myriad of endangered, imperiled, and culturally significant wildlife species. This region provides critical outdoor recreation activities, including camping, hiking, hunting, fishing, birding, and wildlife-watching generating billions in revenue for the region. It is also part of our agricultural backbone supporting 64+ million cattle and 100+ types of crops providing food, fiber, fuel, and economic opportunities. The region also stores vast amounts of carbon beneath untilled grasslands that contributes to climate change mitigation and provides homes for 79+ million people, the majority being concentrated in large urban areas while sparsely populated rural communities inhabit much of the landscape.

Key to conserving these vital landscapes for the wildlife and people that depend on them is adequate funding. Thus, as the Department of Agriculture (USDA) as well as the Department of the Interior (DOI) allocate ecosystem restoration funds that may be appropriated through the federal agencies (e.g. Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Farm Bill as well as potential individual bills in the future), we urge you to prioritize the distribution of these funds in ways that maximize ecological uplift to the grasslands. Doing this would help these ecosystems recover from conversion, drought, invasive plants and diseases, and energy development.

It is vital the funding be allocated through a deliberate and strategic framework that prioritizes maximum conservation benefit. The prioritization approach we recommend will target investment where it is needed most. Now more than ever we need USDA and DOI to come together and leverage resources, technology, and people to change the plight of our grasslands for a sustainable future for wildlife and people. To ensure durability for the future, our conservation design needs to integrate the patchwork of land ownership, across fences/borders, ensuring large blocks of working land and First Nation and Public land that is managed with the community to ensure landscape sustainability. We also encourage funding models that help ensure strategic investments and leverage dollars and partners including the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and Migratory Bird Joint Ventures and potential funding strategies such as the North American Grassland Conservation Act, which this group supports and has endorsed.

Grassland Priority Recommendations/Considerations:

- I. **Prioritize grasslands.** Grasslands are among the most imperiled ecosystems in the world and only 3% of the 600+ million acres in North America are formally protected. Native grasslands are an important biome for sequestering carbon and can help offset greenhouse gas emissions. Conversion of native grasslands to cropland not only diminishes carbon uptake capacity but releases stored carbon, contributing to carbon emissions. Thus, a top priority needs to be the conservation and restoration of our nation's grasslands/rangelands while building resiliency to manage through climate change and expanded drought cycles.
 - A. Keep intact the remaining 98 million acres of grass and increase voluntary enrollment in conservation easements through federal, state, NGO and Land trust partners. Also innovate on shorter term easements that can have options to transition to long-term and provide lease options for retaining grass. Improve land and soil health on these acres to ensure a sustainable grass-based economy on Native nation, private and public lands. (acres to impact: 98 million)
 - 1) Of particular note regarding reducing conversion of our intact grasslands, climate change has opened a wider door for the potential of increased biofuels. However, while we support the development of alternatives to fossil fuels, we have seen the impact of well-meaning biofuels policy result in expansion of markets and a wave of grassland conversion. In 2019 alone, 2.6 million acres of grasslands were converted in the Great Plains. We strongly recommend that any new or expanded biofuels policies be coupled with programs that reduce conversion. Otherwise, we literally lose ground in the fight to capture and store carbon in the ground.
 - B. Improve the 130 million acres of grassland at-risk of conversion to crops and encroachment by non-native trees and shrubs. Diversify funding support for incentives which keep lands in native grass and compete with crop prices and fluctuating markets (make grass more profitable to farmers, ranchers, and Tribes). Address the massive threat of woody encroachment, implement early detection, rapid response prevention methods. (acres to impact: 80% or 104 million by 2032)
 - C. Restore converted and encroached land for the remaining 395 million acres. Prioritize areas of most critical concern as well as areas where there is ability to gain control of the encroachment before it is at crisis level. Also convert low yield croplands on poor soils back to native grass and forb cover. (acres to impact: 8% or 32.5 million by 2032)
 - 1) Expand sodsaver nationwide to reduce the incentive for breaking out marginal grasslands and converting them to cropland.
 - D. Retain and expand Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) lands in grass, target retention in areas that buffer core and at-risk grasslands. Assist with infrastructure needs to keep CRP grass in grass including livestock watering and fencing. Assist with cost-share on native forbs and seeds to

encourage native mixes that are site and climate adapted. Restore old CRP stands that are non-native monocultures to more diverse cover.

- E. Promote the keystone role of prairie dogs in select areas on public, Tribal, and private lands through annual sylvatic plague mitigation and incentive programs to advance recovery of listed species, including black-footed ferrets and prevent the listing of declining species.
- F. Return fire to the landscape *to reduce fuel loads* and restore ecological processes. Provide equipment and training and support local burn cooperatives for these restoration efforts.
- G. Promote the keystone role of bison on public, Tribal, and private lands.

II. Invest in biological and social science and training. Provide measures to evaluate and guide strategic conservation investments. Advance knowledge around limiting factors, migratory pathways and habitat needs and management implications for wildlife habitat. The needs, realities and values of people living on the land should be incorporated into our strategies. Ensure we are sharing technology and knowledge on advancements in land, water and soil health and management.

- A. Increase social science capacity in the region to inform and evaluate conservation actions, economics, engagement and strategies for behavior change and retention of sustainable practices.
- B. Identify the crucial information gaps in wildlife and ecosystems that scientific research should be addressing. This includes understanding where in the annual cycle species like birds are most limited and enhancing knowledge/developing new tools to mitigate non-native disease like sylvatic plague. Enable science to prioritize focus areas and evaluate conservation investments.
- C. Provide training on soil and range health, financial planning, drought management, etc. This also includes strategies to re-Indigenize rangeland conservation to ensure cultural relevance, access and opportunities for programs and funding on Native nation lands.
- D. Support adoption of regenerative grazing practices by ramping up technical support across the region and increasing cost share support for infrastructure needed.

III. Provide drought planning. Drought, driven by long-term over-allocation of water resources as well as climate change is an issue that will continue to plague our grassland ecosystems and the communities and livelihoods that depend on them. Water limitations both currently and into the future should be a top consideration for sustaining our grasslands.

- A. Address aquifer capacity by helping to retire or better manage lands running out of water. Be proactive so land can be restored to native grass before water runs out.
- B. Identify markets and communities for native seed sources for restoration that are drought resistant.
- C. Promote regenerative agriculture practices on existing crop fields that stimulate soil, land health and help conserve water.

IV. Support local economies. Grassland ecosystem health is directly tied with rural/local community economic health. Ensure local economies dependent on grasslands can fairly compete and have multiple avenues to make a living beyond large corporations.

- A. Develop and promote incentives to build large, connected blocks of habitat across eased, public, tribal and working lands on the landscape while supporting property rights through well developed, county, federal, land trust, municipality and state partnerships with local communities.
- B. Support additional and advanced infrastructure (including processing plants) to create greater economic return for producers of locally raised products.

- C. Using science-based siting analyses, encourage low-impact energy (renewable/nonrenewable) siting in the Great Plains through collaborative efforts with stakeholders (wildlife agencies, conservation NGOs, power purchasers, landowners, and developers).
 - 1) Create innovative financial incentives and opportunities to promote siting of renewable energy and associated transmission networks on already disturbed lands and away from known high-risk areas for priority resources (i.e., bird and bat concentration and migration areas), protecting intact native grassland habitat.
 - 2) Promote best management practices for installation and operation to mitigate impacts to natural systems and native species (e.g., restoration using native plants, technology and siting measures to reduce impacts, etc.)
 - a. Promote Great Plains role in securing US energy independence as part of a long-term sustainable framework that supports healthy human and wildlife communities.
 - b. Establish consistent mitigation requirements for energy projects and associated transmission networks to offset impacts and conserve intact native grasslands.

V. Generational succession. Tax, conservation, and market policies support opportunities for multi-generational agricultural families to pass their land, business, and culture to interested members of successive generations

- A. For qualified agricultural lands, estate tax is reduced, deferred and/or eliminated for long-term/permanent conservation agreements.
- B. Establish and fund Tribal land buy-back program.
- C. Financial and land management training and support is available for Indigenous and non-Indigenous young/new entrants into agribusiness and land ownership.
- D. Support both indigenous and multi-generational values and connections to the land and promote practices that honor family histories and tribal ways of life.

VI. Ensure Native nation access to resources to secure community and landscape health: Native nation lands are a significant portion of the Grassland landscape. Native nations need resources for food sovereignty, support for community members, and enhanced opportunities for careers for current and future generations. They need equitable access to federal programs to implement land and water stewardship and develop opportunities for livelihoods based on rangeland management. We suggest that USDA look to Intertribal Agriculture Council and the Native American Fish and Wildlife Society for guidance on this.

- A. Resources for new and established community-based, Indigenous-led educational programs that preserve and strengthen Tribal citizens' understanding of connections between people and nature, promote indigenous lifeways, and create opportunities for people to engage with nature.
- B. Support and expand training programs for Indigenous communities that incorporate and allow traditional knowledge and values while still promoting access to federal programs for funding through USDA and DOI to improve grassland health and function.
- C. Training programs for USDA/DOI and staff to improve their communications with Native people to effectively increase access to federal grants and loans for nature stewardship.
- D. Support and expand training for non-tribal partners including conservation organizations that build trust and collaborative opportunities while ensuring Tribal sovereignty.
- E. Increase internship and education opportunities and scholarships for Indigenous students and students of color.

- F. Resources to Native nation natural resources departments and communities to support restoration and management priorities – such as bison and black-footed ferret re-introductions – on Native nation lands.

The Roadmap's overarching goal through this collaborative effort is to save what we have left, restore and improve what's degraded, and enhance biodiversity and resiliency across the landscape. The Roadmap's efforts to bring together local, regional and national expertise have already produced common goals and priorities (executive summary available at www.grasslandsroadmap.org). Representatives of the Roadmap would like to continue to discuss and collaborate with the USDA officials responsible for planning and disbursing funding, to help guide investments that address concrete actions identified in the Roadmap to conserve our grasslands/rangelands and wildlife.

Secretary Vilsack, thank you for your consideration of these important issues. We are at a moment in history when we have the opportunity to effect real change for the betterment of our ecosystems and communities throughout the Great Plains. We greatly value and appreciate you time and consideration on these matters, and we look forward to working together.

Sincerely,

The Central Grassland Roadmap Planning Team

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