

Grasslands Partners Forum ~ August 26th, 2021

Breakout Group Notes

OVERVIEW

These questions were asked in breakout groups at the end of the presentations on 8/26/21 to provide time for reflection and for colleagues across sectors to discuss reactions and ideas spurred by the speakers. Most breakout groups focused on the first question and one or two others as the point was not necessarily to get through all eight questions, but to have a conversation about what most interested participants. Additional time was most certainly needed to get through more of the topics.

1. Considering the Roadmap effort not as an organization redundant to your work, but as the connective thread between all of this biome-wide action, what are the contributions you're excited about making to this collaborative effort?

- Identifying synergies and tradeoffs between ecosystem services & biodiversity
- Looking for alternatives for PES and other innovative conservation finance opportunities
- Interdisciplinary opportunities, like social science
- We need a wholistic approach to grasslands and hoping that can lead through its complexities
- Excited for Indigenous-led conservation to be a part of this
- Learning about partnerships I was not previously aware of
- My job is to provide conservation assistance to ranchers on private land and this gives me a lot more information to give them the context they need.
- They are always looking for financial avenues as ranchers, so learning about the various programs that I can pass information along about will be very beneficial
- Expanding visibility for the Indigenous-led initiative I am supporting, along with financial support
- Various partnerships are extremely important: working for BLM, we tend to be concerned about BLM lands but in New Mexico we pride ourselves on the partnership development that we take part in; particularly thinking about some of the work being done in the part of the state where there's lesser prairie chicken habitat, partnerships there are key.
- I work with a private family foundation who is beginning this journey and learning where we can provide support for efforts around grassland conservation; we're interested in reintroduction of bison and where that contributes to this effort
 - On September 2nd there is the transboundary conservation conversation about bison and Indigenous led conservation.



- USFWS – leverage through existing programs, how to get even more strategic on grassland conservation for Region 6, Mtn-Prairie Region; adaptive management that's pulling in the same direction; need to speak in terms of what producer's value
- BCR – learning about objectives and data needs, provide data source for evaluating priorities and conservation objectives to improve outcomes; WLFW framework – partner biologists in NRCS offices – will help be more strategic and focused
- OPJV – JVs delivery mechanism, variation across the JVs and how to evaluate effectiveness; being part of the on-the-ground implementation piece, which is critical
- Learning from partners
- Need to work with Native nations
- Social science is critical in including producers in a scientific way
- We need to do due diligence on data tool trainings; aligning data tools to pressing threats at all levels of staff/agencies (NRCS and beyond) will be very powerful
- Mesquite encroachment in lesser prairie chicken habitat and monitoring bird responses
- Videos/outreach to private landowners – would like to create ranchers' testimonials on how public land ranchers conservation mechanisms have made improvements for conservation
- WWF – Plowprint and RAP work ... combining the threats has already been a great outcome of the Roadmap; shared and strategic goals will drive greater conservation success and investment
- Unique solutions in regions, but much to learn from one another; importance of shared metrics
- Prioritization: quote from Tim Griffith that *you can't work everywhere, you have to pick where you work!* Need to be able to credibly tell funders / landowners that we know what and where we need to make change to achieve outcomes we seek
- Social science and make Social Science available to most of the partners
- Ensure implementation is local on the ground; providing the local landowner perspective
- Increase in the number of FSA/CRP offers coming in from the grassland program
- Get congress to expand # of acres that can go in as cap of only 2 million acres for the whole nation is too limiting; government and congress to increase acre allocation; Colorado alone had 800,000 acres submitted for sign up
- Water: water quality and runoff, runoff events, sedimentation, counties with nitrogen rates and high cancer rates and uranium; grassland buffers around rivers, playas to help with sediment and nutrient and buffering; need to invest in our water to keep communities sustainable ... \$12 million water quality improvement project in Hastings, we have to pay for it
- Carbon and climate change: carbon market is the wild wild west ... carbon credits for no-till but one-time benefit, land changes, has only 3 year tenure
- Economic incentives that are viable: payment for 30-year conservation measure vs. 3-year
- Transition from traditional to organic farming to assist with water quality too
- NRCS – connection to landowners & working relationships with landowners



- USFS – different than FSA/NRCS, as we don't have grant/initiatives, but excited about opportunity to amplify others' efforts, for example National Grasslands: challenges are similar in terms of ecological stressors
- Raise awareness of grasslands/rangelands and capitalize on new cross-boundary opportunities
- What success looks like for an invertebrate on grasslands: so many questions unanswered about inverts on grasslands, but we bring expertise in pollinator communities and partner staff across the region who are eager to work on rangelands
- New document on managing rangelands for pollinators, and in progress document on the value of wildflowers to livestock
- Landowner work groups to scale up conservation by bringing huge acres to the table and agree on management and monitoring: brings more trust and engagement to have local groups working with federal governments and integrate the work we want to do
- Roadmap helps link KS to further north grasslands, local groups absolutely help foster trust with NRCS; producer engagement meetings with ranchers help shape the grasslands work there
- Local working groups are essential, we should all be helping bring them achieve their goals, (Missouri River Basin Interagency Round Up) ... will bring this project to their attention
- USFWS - Wildlife and at-risk science support to risk that is out there, show benefits we can bring at large scale, bring relationships with lots of groups: flexibility, leveraging funds, partners programs, and able to help local groups

2. Taking Action: Do you know where there is the cultural will to act now and to build/defend large grassland cores within the biome?

- Grasslands for Generations is increasing buy-in from 15 Native nations in the Northern Great Plains for integrated conservation and sustainable development
- This is something Bird Conservancy has had conversation around and would be great to use metrics to identify and show where there is cultural will, whether dollars spent on conservation projects or another measure to map spatially
- Have some examples from Canada – a lot of opportunities around carbon, e.g., CAD\$631 million in Canada Smart Climate Solutions (<https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/environmental-funding/programs/nature-smart-climate-solutions-fund.html>)
- Look to watershed level, landowner-level
- Landowner cooperatives in southern/SE Arizona: Malpai borderlands group (grassbanking on landscape scale), Diablo Trust (landowner – driven conservation ranching collaborative), Altar Valley Conservation Alliance, Cienega Watershed; CCAST is supporting these organizations
- Texas coastal prairie conservation initiative (middle TX coast) works to conserve coastal prairie to support species and processes with emphasis on brush management, Rx grazing, burning
- Thunder Basin Grassland Prairie Ecosystem Association in WY, Karval Community Alliance, Colorado, Rancher Stewardship Alliance, MT



- This topic is key: when working on landscape scale projects, it's important to work with the folks on the landscape and access those people; federal agencies need assets on the ground, embedded in the community
 - Example: people want to have a Blackfoot Challenge in every watershed and this isn't possible ... need the right recipe of people, resources, support, relationships, etc.
 - Delivery mechanisms have to be local with trusted relationships with the community
 - Need influential landowners as well
 - **Participant question:** should we compensate them for their time and leadership within their community? **Participant answers:** Science shows direct compensation for landowners undermines their stewardship ethic; hesitate to bolster these efforts through financial compensation // compensate them for travel: have a "cowboy conservationist" group that travels and talks landowner to landowner around the landscape. Roadshows with key community leaders.
- The Conservation Fund is a national land trust working with federal, state and private partners to fund easements partnering in MT with USFWS, NRCS-ALE
- The process is long and we don't hold the titles ourselves; we hand them off to someone else to manage. Ranchers aren't comfortable working with non-profits [or] the federal government
- This is the single biggest need to address right now: preventing fragmentation; we need to keep multi-generational ranches on the landscape.
- Running into a generational paradigm shift: changing over time with new, younger ranchers with less preconceived notions
- Some do not understand fire is a natural part of the ecosystem: there is a cost to fire suppression, but overcoming the implications of current large fires is also a challenge
- Loud and clear: private landowners and economy of cattle industry is big asset and added resiliency for wildlife
- Already have a strong idea of where we have the cultural will in NE ... now wrapping heads around next 5 years and having resources to meet demand in the landscape
- Landowners coming together to address woody encroachment as an example of scaling up
- Networks of public lands can connect to private lands and create largescale areas for conservation
- Consider historical spatial data to see where practices have been applied over time to gauge the rancher cultural will for conservation in certain regions; engagement conversations to identify landowners who were interested (mostly producers)
- **Participant question:** is the cultural will open to seeing all this baseline data, and thinking through how to deal with it? Must be a relationship between conservation and economics and how it can support rural communities ... those aspects have to be integrated with the landscape health



3. From Clint and Tim's Opening Talk: The vast majority of grasslands in the Great Plains are in private ownership and are stewarded as working cattle ranches. Grassland conservation actions must be compatible and beneficial to these operations if widespread adoption is desired. How might the actions being discussed impact private agricultural producers?

- One of the most important issues discussed earlier is the partnerships that we have
- Private ranchers need to be heard: many of the ventures and state/federal agencies are listening now more than ever ... to be compatible, they need to have ranchers on the boards of these ventures and private organizations to help be heard
- We need landscape level approaches for grasslands; we need to think about large scale and when we have private property in the mix there is always a dynamic ebb and flow, and [somewhat] getting over the North American culture of private property rights vs. landscape level considerations
 - This will take a long time but it is a conversation well worth having
- One of the things we do here in NM on the Eastern side of the state where mesquite is invading grasslands is to try to work through partnerships to do aerial treatments of things
 - So trying to treat on landscape scale and not be worried too much about who owns what (permissions ahead of time?)
 - Doing vegetation treatment, the landowners see that as something that's going to affect their bottom line as well because it will hopefully make the land more productive, from the standpoint of a grassland anyway
 - Need to make it productive from the standpoint of a producer
- This is where social science capacity is really needed to identify barriers and incentives for adoption so we can take advantage of something like a carbon market
- Must consider how we approach ranchers; helping to understand the WHY of the practices
 - Education to producers and ranchers: what tools in toolbox can and can't do
- See the Grasslands Roadmap: *State Inventory* from 4/8/21 that shows programs and efforts
- Must focus on bottom line and R.O.I
- Easier to sell to talk about wallet issues with individual landowners
- Complexity of interweaving the economy and working in tandem on best practices
- Softer transitions between cultivated and native lands (pollinators and plantings of native forbs)
- CRP contracts expire, EQIP practice can't sustain – lose grassland bird habitat benefits from timing of haying ... we need to move towards more of a grazing system focused on economics & birds
- Get prescribed fire recognized as a valuable tool ... \$50/acre for mechanical removal versus \$2/acre for fire
- Training a culture of landowner stewards that embrace all tools in the toolbox
- Systems approach to restoring grassland and including bringing fire back



- Funding through NRCS ties back to private landowners
- Putting landowner first, then identify how other values hinge upon that
- Think broadly, bring variety of partners to the table to support implementation plan
- Need to maintain open communication between parties; communication is the common ground
- Unified messages – benefit of Roadmap process (creating a more seamless way to talk about the multitude of opportunities)
- Get interested & excited people connected?

4. From Dean and Doug's close-up look at Kansas: What made Kansas unique in moving forward with the initiative they presented on this morning?

- Treated where we could make a stand and protected cores
- Considered threat of native invasive species (brush encroachment)
- Considered over 100+ years of impact from fire suppression and land use

5. From Joy's Presentation on CRP: What are the barriers to participation in the Grassland Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)?

- Consider that there are not many barriers in some states
- Rental rates
- Limitation on Grazing from NRCS
- Need better communications within USDA and among partners
- If the rate is right, landowners might better understand the potential pay-off to them and thus more likely to look into the program
- This is a Human Dimensions research opportunity that may not be as publishable, but more helpful to implementation (creating decision support tools)

6. From David's Presentation: How can we prioritize local conservation actions to maximize outcomes for avian biodiversity and human wellbeing in the Great Plains?

- Consider water and human recreation
- Outreach toward understanding importance of grassland and the repercussions of actions
 - Outreach is usually too general and needs to be more specific for regions



7. From Dirac's Presentation: Given the threats to the Great Plains biome, how can your organization support efforts to scale-up conservation action with private landowner groups and foster a culture that maintains iconic grassland regions for future generations?

- CRP already does this and we need to maintain the integrity of the program, so let's also ask, "*In cultures where grasslands are valued, how do we support those?*"
- Help with capacity to elevate producer group representation; identify where there is interest but also a need for leadership
- Increase bandwidth to work as a community
- More effort to understand social drivers, economics, a sense of security and long-term sustainability than a focus on better tools for conversations
- In college- speak at ag classes- educate future generations when in college
- Tie it to cattle and beef and that everyone has a stake in this

8. From USFWS: How can we get a better understanding of the programs and resources available and how can we (USFWS) support, integrate and compliment those efforts?

- Communication
- Distribute through the Grasslands Roadmap effort
- Get involved with your local JV
- Better connections between DOI and DOA, and filtering down to federal partners
- PFFW program and on the ground delivery but what is the role of FWS in grassland conservation- permitting, programmatic and ESA?
- Limit bottlenecks we've created (e.g. MBTA and broader burn window ... need bigger window)
- Talking more between agencies of NRCS, FSA and USFWS and joint meeting about everything versus just LEPC and ESA ... truly building trust and partnership ...
- Conversations broader than regulatory



Grasslands Roadmap: State Inventory

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Seth Gallagher - NFWF	Jim Giocomo-America...	Martha Kauffman WWF	Tate.Lantz	Gary Sullivan - The Cons...	John Carlson - USFWS
John W. Smith, USFWS	Tammy VerCauteren Bird...	Joy Alspach, Farm Ser...	TIM ANDERSON- U. S. Fi...	Matt Hogan, USFWS	Chris Latimer, Bird Co...
Samantha Brooke (USFW...	Steve Kettler - USFWS	David Pavlacky - Bird...	Graeme Patterson - J...	Renee Chi - BLM	Libby Khumalo
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