

Follow up questions for Chief Lohr from the Central Grasslands Roadmap Summit

- **Amazing demonstration of sustainable grazing during today's talks. What is keeping the ranchers who are not using regenerative practices in business?**
 - That would be a difficult question for NRCS to answer as we do not delve into the overall financial planning and treatments of income associated with each operation. The ranching industry is highly variable and complex across the landscape of America. Sources of income to the operation may vary from other uses of the forage base for products such as hay, seed, etc., to recreation and energy production to name a few. However, over the long-term a respectful and planned stewardship of the forage base and overall health of the soil and water resources are essential to a ranching operation that can adapt and adjust to whatever natural variable weather, animal health, and market fluctuations are thrown at the rancher.

- **Government policies/subsidies?**
 - NRCS doesn't work in the policies related to subsidies and policies dealing with market influences and price fluctuations regarding land values, cost of production and price for product. Thankfully, we are provided significant authorities under the Farm Bill and other laws to provide technical assistance through our trained conservationists and partner agencies/organizations along with financial cost share to stimulate voluntary adoption of conservation practices that improve or enhance the resource while promoting more efficient use through planned grazing or other uses. For example, over 50% of our Environmental Quality Incentives Program funding must target practices that benefit livestock operation. Not all livestock operations are ranches, yet a significant amount of the funding does go to ranchers in the plains and western states.

- **What is the number one challenge that Ranchers face today?**
 - Probably weather variability and related hazards along with market forces.

- **Can we help them through conservation practices?**
 - Yes. When producers properly plan and incrementally implement conservation practices in the proper sequence and at the appropriate time, they should realize benefits to both their natural resource base and operational efficiencies.

- **There was discussion today that in the past it was either "taking care of your ranch or conserving land" there's no longer a choice, today it's both. How can we make that more possible?**
 - Connecting the Central Plains Grassland Road Map to [Working Lands for Wildlife](#) (WLFW) would result in unprecedented grassland conservation for North American birds. WLFW is NRCS's premier approach in the western US for conserving grasslands for ranching and wildlife.

- Built around a shared vision of achieving wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching, this effort has already resulted in the conservation of 9.6 million acres of grass and shrubland conservation on western rangelands since 2010. NRCS just released an Outcomes Report detailing the benefits from conserving 1.6 million acres of habitat in the southern Great Plains through the [Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative](#).
 - Key findings include increases in habitat suitability for prairie chickens which improved by 11% for every 1% of the landscape that NRCS put into Prescribed Grazing. NRCS worked with producers to transition expiring CRP fields from idle to working grasslands. These actions contributed to the outcome that 60% of expired CRP fields in the region remained as grasslands a decade later.
 - In addition to prairie chicken benefits, LPCI also conserved [4.5 million songbirds](#) including the most vulnerable grassland obligate species. By addressing landowner interests, and reducing habitat loss and degradation in agrarian landscapes, private land conservation provides an emerging solution to the declining avifauna of North America, and scales-up to meet population recovery goals for the most imperiled grassland birds.
 - NRCS is in the midst of revising LPCI into a broader strategy to conserve grasslands in the entirety of the US Great Plains. As our collective goals meet at this moment in time, it would be amazing to snap these two plans together.
- **One speaker spoke about the need for increased monitoring and the potential for NRCS to increase capacity in this area. Would Xerces Society staff be a good example of insect monitoring within NRCS? Bird Conservancy of the Rockies for birds? Others? They both have several staff at NRCS offices already. What other ways might NRCS support and increase monitoring programs and address the barriers the rancher from Montana discussed?**
 - The Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, Pheasants Forever, and Xerces Society along with other valued conservation partners, help increase NRCS capacity to deliver voluntary conservation. We truly value and appreciate their partnership in providing shared staffing capacity to help deliver technical assistance, enhancing 'on farm' monitoring, and for assistance in conducting outcome-based evaluations to assess benefits and quantify results.
 - NRCS supports partners in these efforts through numerous mechanisms within and outside of the Agency. Within NRCS we have funding available through the [Regional Conservation Partnership Program](#). Outside NRCS, we also contribute to the [Conservation Partners Program](#) within the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.
 - **How can we increase partnerships and success stories between ranchers? We've realized now that a rancher can make conservation changes on their own ranch, but it will really only matter if their neighbors do it too.**
 - The first key to scaling up grassland conservation in the Great Plains is to create a shared vision that is inclusive of both people and wildlife (Wildlife Conservation

Through Sustainable Ranching). When diverse stakeholders see themselves as part of the solution, they are much more willing to participate and contribute.

- The second is to develop a roadmap identifying whole watersheds where everyone agrees to put their financial and technical resources to achieve desired outcomes. As opposed to random acts of conservation kindness, spatial targeting gets everybody pulling in the same direction in the same places. Its importance cannot be overstated.
- Third is the large-scale implementation of on-the-ground conservation actions that reduce threats facing grasslands, wildlife and ranching. The scale of conservation must match the scale of the threat to achieve meaningful outcomes.
- Fourth is quantifying conservation outcomes that don't measure themselves. Outcomes are superior to outputs (acres, feet, miles) because they tell the upshot of your wildlife and agricultural story. This is often a missing and poorly funded link to conservation delivery. [Co-production](#) is WLFW preferred approach to quantifying outcomes on western grasslands.
- Outcomes often serve as the foundation for effective communications. The agricultural community is notoriously poor at telling our story. In your Great Plains Conservation Roadmap, you should consider a separate line item to help tell these important stories.
- You can read about many ranchers and other agricultural producers who are improving their operations while conserving wildlife habitat on the [farmers.gov blog](#) (including the [#FridaysOnTheFarm series](#)).
- **How do we slow the pace of grassland conversion, how do we increase support for restoring marginal lands, how do we make cultivated land more compatible with supporting biodiversity and long term land resilience? What lessons learned from wetlands conservation can be applied/adapted for grasslands? How do we get better coordination across states, regions and countries?**
 - North American prairie is being lost at a rate equivalent to deforestation of the Brazilian Amazon, especially in the Great Plains where two percent of grassland is lost to cropland annually. Cultivation is the primary culprit of grassland loss coupled with woodland expansion that degrades extant grasslands. To counter this trend, we must embrace a working lands philosophy wherein grasslands are maintained and restored through ranching. Three mechanisms can be incorporated into your Great Plains Roadmap to embrace this working rangeland philosophy.
 - First mechanism is to target Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) to landscapes where a ranching heritage still exists, and then help landowners incorporate expiring CRP into permanent grazing operations which typically requires some fencing and water for livestock.
 - Second mechanism is to offer voluntary conservation easements targeted to ranchers in priority watershed to conserve in perpetuity important grassland habitats.

- Third mechanism is to steward remaining grasslands by addressing widespread threat of woodland expansion. In the Great Plains, livestock production and rancher profitability declines by 75% when grasslands transition to redcedar woodlands. Wildfire suppression tactics become ineffective and virtually all grassland-dependent species are displaced.