

Summary of FWP's Working Grasslands Initiative

Goal: To help support viable populations of grassland-associated wildlife by providing non-regulatory conservation tools to private landowners interested in retaining and enhancing Montana's native grasslands through working lands agriculture.

Objectives:

1. Work with private landowners and other partners to protect existing grasslands from new habitat loss or degradation;
2. Work with private landowners and other partners to restore and enhance degraded grasslands, especially those in close proximity to existing, intact grasslands;
3. Work with private landowners and other partners to maintain or increase population trends of indicator grassland wildlife species through habitat conservation efforts; and,
4. Create a roadmap for achieving Montana State Wildlife Action Plan grassland objectives in cooperation with private landowners and other conservation partners.

Conservation tools available under this initiative:

Grassland protection:

- Conservation leases
 - 30-year agreement to maintain existing native habitat*
 - Could include species-specific stipulations and/or additional cost-share activities when relevant to grassland wildlife conservation objectives (e.g., prohibition on prairie dog poisoning, fence modifications to facilitate pronghorn connectivity, etc.)
 - One-time payment, flat rate/acre
- Conservation easements
 - Perpetual agreement, includes range management plans*
 - Payment based on Fair Market Value

Grassland enhancement/maintenance:

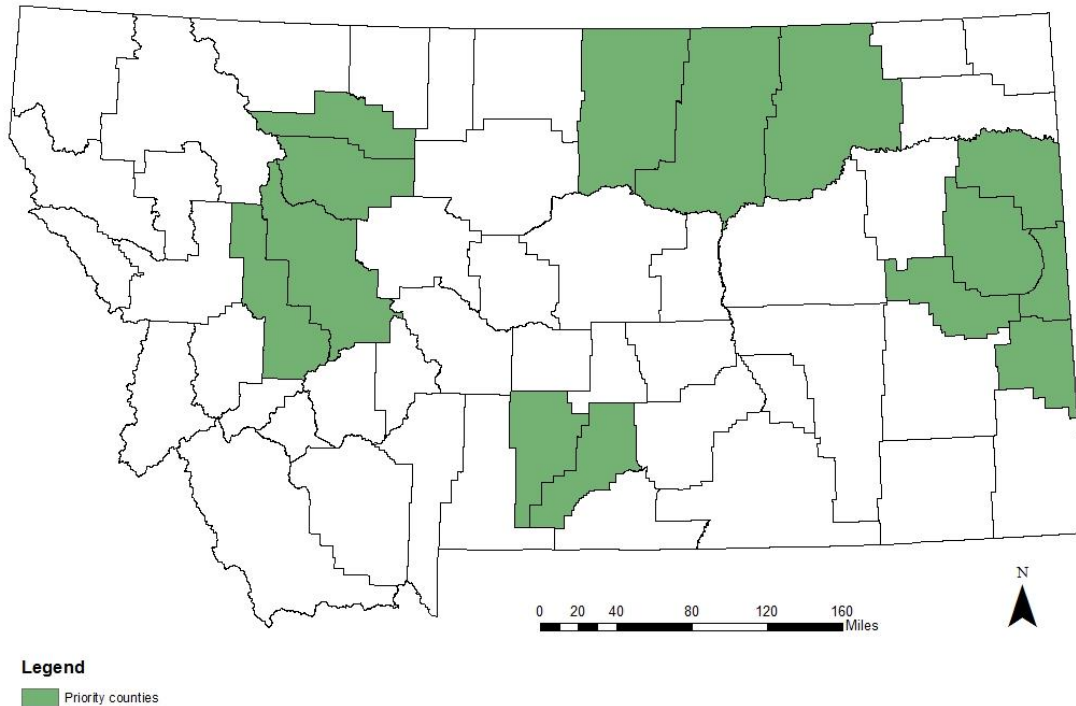
- Range infrastructure cost-share
 - Transition marginal cropland or expiring CRP to grass-based agriculture
 - Up to 75% cost-share on fencing, water supply, etc.
 - Can be in cooperation with other conservation efforts
 - Term agreement to maintain infrastructure*

Grassland restoration:

- Native grassland restoration cost-share
 - Case-by-case basis
 - Up to 75% cost-share on seeding, etc.
 - Usually in cooperation with other conservation efforts
 - Term agreement appropriate to restoration activities*

*All agreements with FWP include negotiated free public access for hunting and/or recreational activities (e.g., birdwatching); specific details negotiated based on habitat values and landowner interest.

Priority Counties: Preference will be given to projects within priority counties (see below). These priority counties have the largest extents of grass based on remotely-sensed imagery. Projects outside of priority counties will be considered for funding under this initiative on a case by case basis.



Project Selection Process and Ranking Criteria: Conservation easements will be evaluated and selected through FWP's existing Wildlife Lands process and scoring criteria. Additional criteria may be added to that process, if deemed necessary, to reflect grassland habitat values.

The Wildlife Habitat Bureau will issue a call for conservation lease projects at least twice annually in coordination with the lands process. Competing projects will be evaluating using the following criteria to ensure that limited technical and financial resources are prioritized for projects that provide the greatest wildlife habitat benefits. Scoring guidelines will be prepared for the following criteria:

- Project is within a priority county,
- Ranching is the predominant land use,
- Project will expand existing protected areas,
- Project will encompass a relatively large landscape (projects $\geq 3,000$ acres will receive highest priority),
- Existing or restored vegetation is dominated by native species,
- Existing property provides habitat for a diversity of wildlife species, especially Montana Species of Concern,
- Project has adequate habitat for specific wildlife recovery needs, if relevant to project objectives (e.g., 1,500+ acres of prairie dog habitat suitable for potential black-footed ferret reintroduction), and,
- Property is considered at high risk of conversion or subdivision development.

Range infrastructure cost-share projects will be evaluated when received. Ranchers Stewardship Alliance is working with the USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program to offer a similar cost-share opportunity to landowners in Blaine, Phillips, and Valley counties. FWP's cost-share opportunity is intended to compliment but not compete with this effort. Range infrastructure cost-share projects will typically have the following characteristics:

- Landowner is interested to transition marginal cropland or expiring CRP acres to grass-based agriculture,
- Existing vegetation is dominated by native species or the landowner is willing to manage non-native stands to favor native establishment,
- Landowner grazes cattle or leases pastures for grazing on other parts of their operation,
- Project expands contiguous acres of pastureland, and,
- Project activities will maintain or enhance habitat values for a diversity of wildlife species.

Native grassland restoration cost-share projects will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. These will typically be in cooperation with other FWP and/or partner conservation efforts. For example, a landowner might be interested to restore a quarter-section of cropland to native grass and then enroll his/her entire operation in a conservation lease.

Partnership Opportunities: There are other conservation options complimentary to this initiative that are available through state and federal agencies, and non-governmental organizations. FWP will work cooperatively with our partners to cumulatively conserve larger landscapes of grassland wildlife habitat. Some of the complimentary programs and opportunities currently available include:

- NRCS provides range infrastructure (EQIP) and conservation easement (ACEP) funding assistance. NRCS is currently contemplating a special state initiative to target EQIP range infrastructure funding to marginal cropland or expiring CRP acres in the Prairie Pothole region.
- Ducks Unlimited recently received a Regional Conservation Partnership Program award to help target NRCS funding for grassland and wetland conservation in the Prairie Pothole region, including parts of Montana.
- The USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program leads several active North American Wetlands Conservation Act partnership projects to conserve wetlands and grasslands in many of our priority counties through conservation easement and some enhancement work (e.g., Rocky Mountain Front, Hi-Line).
- The USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program also uses program and grant funding to work with private landowners on conserving native grasslands and transitioning non-native to native grass stands.
- FWP manages three programs that are also complimentary to this grassland initiative and may provide funding support as appropriate to these programs: Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program, Migratory Bird Wetland Program, and State Wildlife Grants program.

Implementation: FWP will commit to targeted delivery of this initiative for a minimum of 5 years. Implementation will begin as soon as funds are available.

FWP Wildlife Biologists and Upland Game Bird Specialists will continue to work with private landowners and, when appropriate and relevant, discuss initiative options, identify projects, prepare proposals, and develop long-term working relationships with private landowners enrolled under this initiative. They will continue to be the main point of contact between landowners and the Department.

Regional Wildlife Managers will approve project proposals and final agreement terms for projects in their region.

Two seasonal wildlife technicians will be hired to support Wildlife Biologists and Upland Game Bird Specialists with the additional work load associated with this initiative, pending available funding. Location of these positions will be determined through consultation with the Wildlife Managers.

FWP Habitat Bureau staff in Helena will administer the initiative, including calling for projects, ranking and prioritizing projects (in cooperation with Wildlife Managers and Bureau Chiefs), maintaining a project database, tracking budgets, preparing reports, and facilitating outreach efforts. Habitat Bureau staff will also be responsible for acquiring funding and assessing the success of the initiative in 5 years.

FWP Wildlife staff in Helena will work in consultation with the Research Bureau and Wildlife Biologists to track populations of grassland species of interest at project, regional, state, and continental scales. Multi-scale species monitoring data will help assess whether actions in addition to this initiative are necessary to conserve populations of Species of Concern.

Conservation partners host several private land stewardship positions that can help FWP with outreach for this grassland initiative. These include:

- A Private Lands Biologist employed by Bird Conservancy of the Rockies with a primary focus on grassland birds and grassland conservation (Jordan),
- Three Pheasant Forever Habitat Specialists who work with private landowners, primarily helping to deliver NRCS programs (Conrad, Chinook, Scobey),
- Three Ducks Unlimited staff who work with private landowners on wetland-grassland conservation (statewide, northcentral), and,
- Three USFWS Private Lands Biologists working directly with private landowners on wildlife habitat projects (Glasgow, Malta/Jordan, Lewistown).