



Prairie Pothole JOINT VENTURE

Working with conservation partners since 1987.



2025 ANNUAL REPORT

Letter from the Coordinator



In 2025, public-private partnership models like the Joint Venture proved essential. Through strong collaboration, we maintained stability during a period of significant change, ensuring conservation efforts continued to deliver meaningful and lasting impact for stakeholders. Stakeholders like agricultural producers to everyone who benefits from clean water, healthy soils, and a sustainable food system. In short, that's all of us.

This is the third annual report I've had the privilege to introduce. The first highlighted innovative work including methods to measure carbon storage, drone technology for monitoring ducks, and the use of precision agriculture that incentivizes landowners to farm their best acres while conserving their marginal ones. The second report emphasized the critical role of our federal partners like the U.S. Geological Survey, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Habitat and Population Evaluation Team. Their work provides scientific expertise and delivers on-the-ground conservation.

This edition focuses on the contributions of our non-federal partners, particularly those represented on the JV Management Board. Working alongside federal partners, these organizations provide complementary conservation services and actively lead efforts in conservation delivery, outreach, and education.

While the JV provides small amounts of funding, scientific support, and communications expertise to our partners, it is their dedication that keeps conservation moving forward across the Prairie Pothole Region. This report cannot fully capture all they do, but I hope it conveys their importance in conserving birds, wetlands, and grasslands. We salute their efforts.

This year we bid farewell to one of our long-standing Management Board members and a most valuable non-federal partner. Jim Faulstich has been a steadfast advocate for working lands conservation for decades. His contributions and achievements are too numerous to list, but it's worth emphasizing that Jim has been among the very best partners we could ask for. Thank you, Jim, for your unwavering commitment and service to South Dakota, the Prairie Pothole Region, and beyond.

Finally, we also bid farewell to Jacquie Evans, who served as the JV Science Integration Specialist. Jacquie's talent for translating complex science into compelling stories and graphics is evident throughout JV publications and stories. We already miss her expertise, energy, and passion for birds, pollinators, and native plants. Thank you Jacquie!

– Lauri Hanauska-Brown, PPJV Coordinator

Front cover photo: Krista Lundgren / USFWS

Back cover photo: Laura Hubers

Background photo on this page: Sandra Uecker / USFWS



In this Edition

- Audubon's *Conservation Forage Program* offers an approach to support grazing and wildlife habitat.
- The South Dakota Grasslands Initiative builds awareness of grassland ecology and inspires curiosity about the natural world in the next generation.
- The Nature Conservancy uses a collaborative approach to conserve prairies and wetlands—benefiting landowners, mallards, meadowlarks, and monarchs.
- Through its *Grazing Logic* programs, the North Dakota Grazing Lands Coalition promotes conservation practices such as bale grazing and even estate planning.
- Delta Waterfowl works to conserve waterfowl wintering habitat in California and small wetland breeding habitat across the Prairie Pothole Region through working wetland initiatives.
- North Dakota Natural Resources Trust's *Thinking Like a Prairie* program supports public trails, native plant walks, pollinator gardens, and hands-on learning opportunities for students.
- The Montana Grassland Initiative, led by Pheasants Forever, prevents grassland loss, restores prairie function, and strengthens the economic resilience of rural communities through dynamic partnerships.
- Ducks Unlimited supports producers in implementing innovative practices that improve soil health and enhance operational resilience.
- The 7th biennial America's Grasslands Conference, led by the National Wildlife Federation, provided opportunities to network, learn, and collaborate on saving native grasslands.



PPJV Management Board co-chairs, Todd Bishop and Matt Hogan, thank Jim Faulstich for his dedication to the PPJV.

Marcie Hebert / USFWS



2025 Science Highlights

During her 3 year tenure, Jacquie Evans played an important role in helping secure and direct over \$16 million in NRCS EQIP funds for improved bird outcomes, potentially impacting >90,000 acres and over 50 livestock water systems to address drought resiliency and ranch sustainability. Thank you Jacquie!

Josh Vest

There has been a steady decline in wetland dynamics (i.e., wetting and drying of wetlands) across the PPR over the past 44 years, resulting in a long-term decline in duck productivity across the PPR.

[Wetland hydrologic dynamics and duck productivity are declining in the Prairie Pothole Region, and they are linked.](#) Anteau et al. 2026.

New data can support conservation planning for grassland ecosystems and serve as a baseline for monitoring future loss of ecologically important grasslands.

[Spatial predictions of potentially undisturbed grassland across the conterminous US.](#) Barnes et al. 2025.

This study highlights the importance of wetland easements in agricultural landscapes for breeding bird communities, including as strongholds for grassland bird species in precipitous decline across North America.

[Stable occupancy of conservation-priority birds amid community shifts across 16 years on Iowa wetland easements.](#) Gapinski et al. 2025.

Study results indicate that remote sensors commonly used for surface water applications alone may not accurately detect surface water in wetlands smaller than 2 ha (4.9 acres).

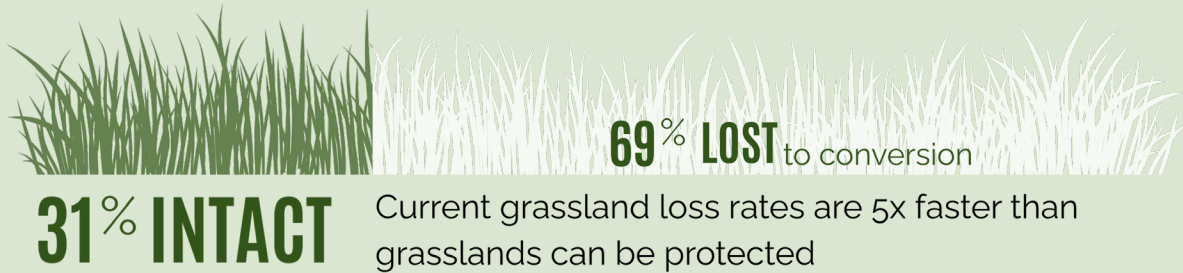
[Small waterbodies of large conservation concern: towards an integrated approach to more accurately measuring surface water dynamics.](#) McKenna et al. 2025.

Research indicates that unmitigated wetland drainage is likely to have a large negative effect on spring migratory resources for dabbling ducks and shorebirds.

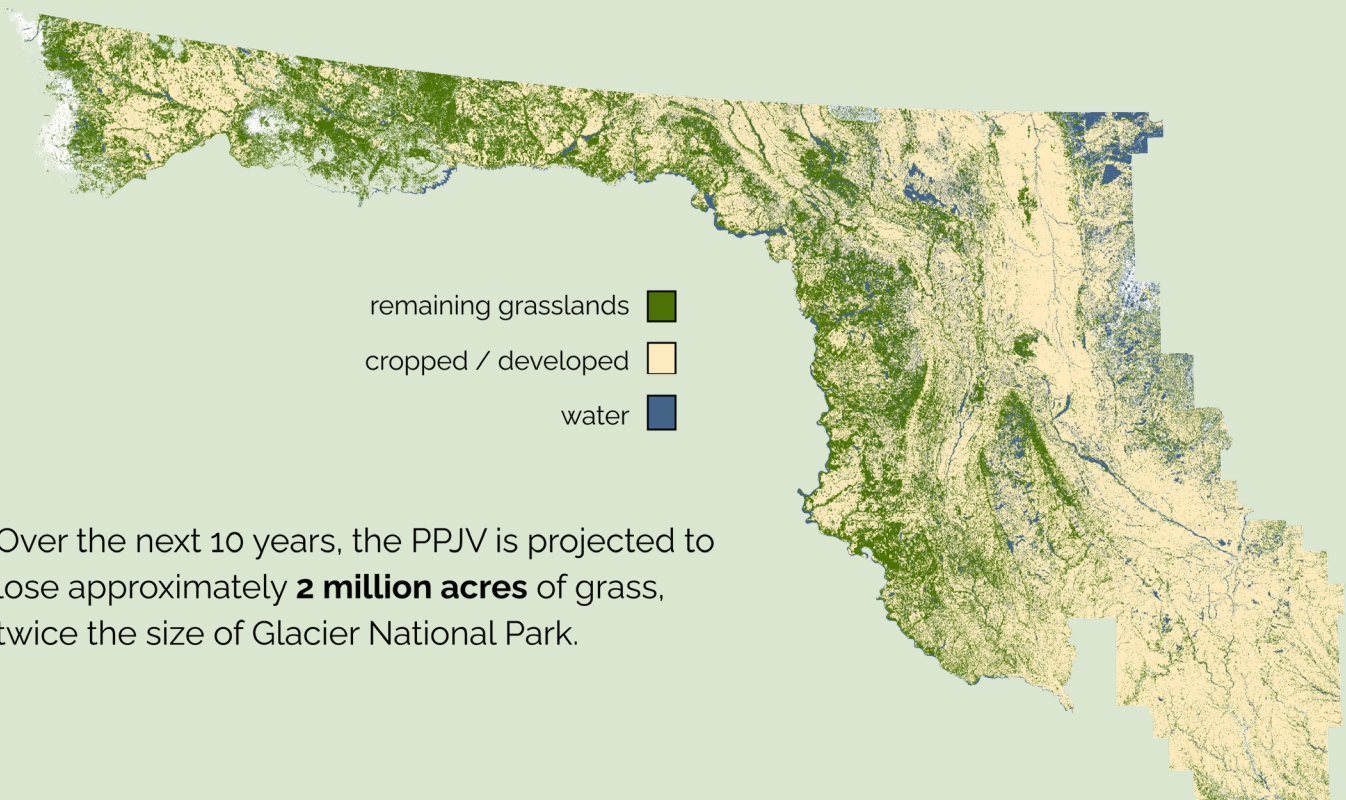
[Modeling wetland resources for spring migratory waterbirds under different agricultural management scenarios in the Iowa portion of the Prairie Pothole Region.](#) Mitchell et al. 2025.



Grasslands in the PPJV

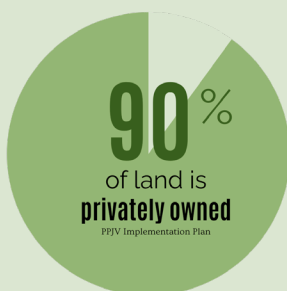


Grassland Distribution Across the PPJV



Over the next 10 years, the PPJV is projected to lose approximately **2 million acres** of grass, twice the size of Glacier National Park.

We Support Working Lands



Collaborating with land stewards through **voluntary approaches on working lands** is a vital part of conserving this landscape.

Data Source: NLCD 2019, U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), 2024, Annual NLCD Collection 1 Science Products: U.S. Geological Survey data release, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), 20240131, Cropland Data Layer: USDA NASS, USDA NASS Marketing and Information Services Office, Washington, D.C. Online Links: <https://croplandcros.scinet.usda.gov/>. Map authored: Habitat and Population Evaluation Team, NWRS US Fish and Wildlife Service. Created Sept 2024

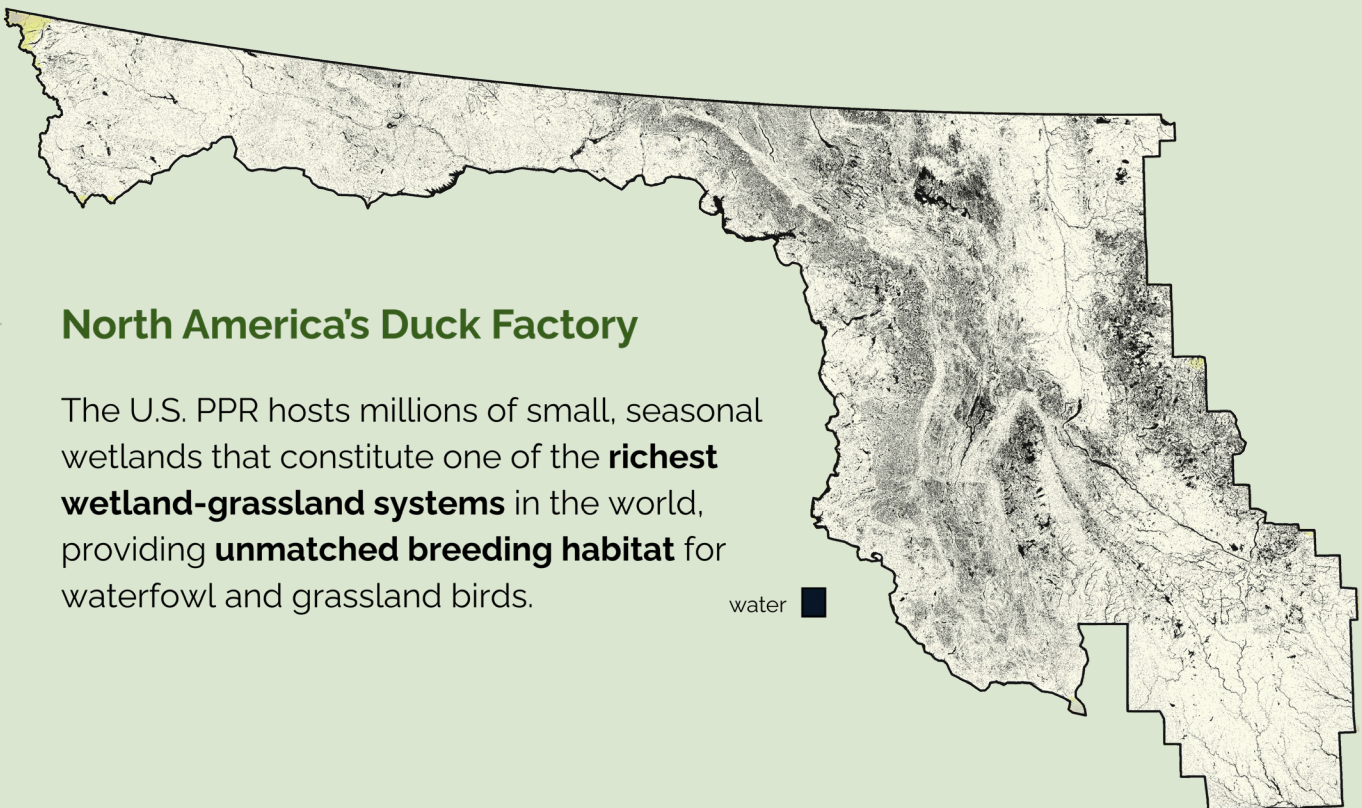


Wetlands in the PPJV



>3 out of 5 North American ducks nest in the PPR
PPJV Implementation Plan

Wetland Distribution Across the PPJV



North America's Duck Factory

The U.S. PPR hosts millions of small, seasonal wetlands that constitute one of the **richest wetland-grassland systems** in the world, providing **unmatched breeding habitat** for waterfowl and grassland birds.

73 % of wetland basins are **<1 ACRE**
USFWS HAPET

63 % of breeding ducks rely on **UNPROTECTED WETLANDS**
PPJV Implementation Plan

80 % of wetland acres are **IN CROPLAND**
USFWS HAPET

Source: NWI 2025, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. National Wetlands Inventory, Wetlands Data Layer. <https://www.fws.gov/program/national-wetlands-inventory/wetlands-data>. Map authored: Habitat and Population Evaluation Team, NWRS US Fish and Wildlife Service. Created Feb 2026.





Catalyzing Grassland Restoration

Kendall Van Zanten / Audubon

Audubon Great Plains Josh Lefers, Conservation Director

The North Dakota Conservation Forage Program (CFP) has become a practical model for how collaborative conservation can restore working lands across the Northern Great Plains. At its core, the program helps producers plant and manage high quality perennial grasslands that support both livestock operations and wildlife habitat. Grassland birds like the Bobolink and Grasshopper Sparrow depend on healthy, connected grasslands for nesting, food, and shelter, and many species are declining as these habitats are lost, degraded, or fragmented. Grassland restoration through CFP rebuilds native plant diversity, structure, and connectivity, creating the conditions grassland birds need to thrive across the seasons.

The program launched in 2021 with support from the North Dakota Outdoor Heritage Fund, North Dakota Wildlife Federation, and

Audubon to restore grasslands on 18,000 acres in ND. Since then, a network of conservation and agriculture focused organizations have joined to make CFP a success and raise the goal for restoration to 45,000 acres in the region. In 2025, Audubon celebrated 100 projects completed, 10,000 acres planted, and 12,000 acres under contract. The success of CFP can be attributed to a network of partners that share responsibility, resources, and credibility with producers.

State agencies, conservation nonprofits, corporations, and local conservation districts each contribute something essential. Technical specialists help producers design seed mixes and grazing strategies that balance soil health, grazing needs, and habitat value. Key investments from funders cover a portion of seed and establishment costs, support grazing infrastructure installation, and provide



establishment payments to provide financial security during the transition period. Partners then leverage this financial assistance to enhance conservation outcomes and community benefits. This shared approach significantly reduces risk for producers and reinforces the understanding that conservation and ranching can exist as mutually beneficial land uses. CFP's success has been driven by this alignment of expertise, financial support, and on the ground relationships.

The model has proven strong enough that in 2023 Audubon worked with Ducks Unlimited (DU) to expand the model in South Dakota through the Working Grasslands Partnership, with DU securing a \$25M Regional Conservation Partnership Program award. The expansion recognizes that grassland systems and ranching economies do not stop at state

borders. By adapting to lessons from the ND framework and emphasizing partner delivery, partners can offer a unified approach that supports forage establishment, grazing resilience, and wildlife habitat across a broader landscape. To date, Working Grasslands Partnership has signed landowner agreements across SD to restore 13,451 acres of cropland back to grass.

Together, these efforts are building a regional strategy for keeping grasslands intact and profitable. CFP has demonstrated that creative working lands solutions can restore grassland and meet the needs of our land stewards. The model's expansion into SD exemplifies how a collaborative model can grow to meet the needs of producers and wildlife across the Northern Great Plains.



A Bobolink perches on a fence post on Scott WPA in Lake Andes Wetland Management District in South Dakota. These birds can navigate using the Earth's magnetic field thanks to iron oxide bristles in their nasal cavity.





Collaborating in Grassland Education

Laura Kahler

South Dakota Grasslands Initiative Laura Kahler, Director

The South Dakota Grasslands Initiative (SDGI) is a communication and collaboration hub launched by the South Dakota Grasslands Coalition and its partners to bring together a diverse audience in support of South Dakota's grasslands. One way this collaboration occurs is through workgroups, consisting of professionals and community members who share a passion for a specific topic, such as grasslands education.

When the South Dakota Grasslands Initiative's Education Workgroup first convened in the summer of 2024, the two dozen members began identifying gaps in existing resources that help the general public better understand South Dakota's grasslands.

One idea that emerged was the development of ready-to-use educational activities that volunteers, with or without prior grasslands

knowledge, could easily use to introduce students to grasslands topics.

Each education tote contains a set of interactive activities, along with accompanying materials and guides. The magic of the development of these kits was bringing together the diverse skills of the workgroup.



Laura Kahler



By combining individuals with expertise and passion in biology, pedagogy, graphic design, and building off statewide partnerships, the group developed and raised funds for 10 education totes, which are now available for check-out across the state.

The goal of these education totes is to build awareness of grassland ecology, foster curiosity about native species and ecological relationships, and support SDGI's broader mission of promoting grassland conservation and public understanding of grassland values—both ecological and social. By providing ready-to-use educational resources, SDGI and its partners aim to connect youth with South Dakota's prairie heritage and empower educators with engaging tools to bring this vital ecosystem into learning environments.

With all necessary supplies included, these activities have been checked out by volunteers at community events, scout leaders, after-school program educators, ranchers, and others working with youth. In the first year, over a thousand South Dakotans have been exposed to at least one of the activities in the tote, and the work group speaks to the team's collaborative work to address the need for South Dakotans to have more opportunities to connect with the grassland ecosystem of the state.



1,000+ people
reached in the
first year

Kaylee Wheeler, SDSU Extension Range Field Specialist, using the grassland education tote with 4-H youth in Tripp County, SD to discuss grassland plants and pollinators.





Conservation Partnerships

Richard Hamilton Smith

The Nature Conservancy in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota

Across the Prairie Pothole Region, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) works with partners, agencies and landowners to restore prairies, wetlands and working lands that support wildlife and communities.

“Spanning multiple states and a mix of land ownership, communities and funding sources, conservation in the Prairie Pothole Region can’t happen alone,” said Rachel Bush, TNC’s grassland strategy director for Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota.

Collaboration
is at the heart of
everything we do.
- Rachel Bush

One example is the Northern Tallgrass Prairie National Wildlife Refuge, established by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in 2000 to slow the decline of native tallgrass prairie in Minnesota and Iowa. Since 2013, TNC has partnered with USFWS to add 9,000 acres to the refuge using Minnesota’s Outdoor Heritage Fund dollars. Together, they help landowners secure conservation easements and restore habitat—keeping land in private hands while benefiting wildlife.

Science also drives TNC’s work. For nearly 20 years, TNC, state and federal partners have completed more than 8,000 surveys across 218 grassland sites to study how management practices like controlled burns and grazing impact prairie health. The data are available to land managers and helps inform strategies that maintain native species and improve habitat quality.





In South Dakota, TNC has helped conserve more than 100,000 acres of prairie and wetlands through voluntary conservation easements with USFWS. These agreements allow landowners to keep working lands productive while supporting species like mallards, meadowlarks, and monarch butterflies. Due to the program's popularity, TNC added staff to help enroll more interested landowners in the program.

Partnerships extend to public lands as well. Through the Minnesota Prairie Recovery Program, funded by the Outdoor Heritage Fund, TNC has enhanced more than 215,000 acres of prairie, restored more than 2,700 acres, and permanently protected more than 8,000 acres. Enhancement activities include invasive species removal, conservation grazing, controlled burns, and native seeding—all aimed at boosting native species diversity and improving critical wildlife habitat.

From science to on-the-ground restoration, TNC's collaborative approach ensures lasting conservation impact across the Prairie Pothole Region, protecting prairies and wetlands now and for generations to come.

Chris Helzer





Sharing Grazing Logic

Lesley Icenogle

North Dakota Grazing Lands Coalition Lesley Icenogle, Administrator

The mission of the North Dakota Grazing Lands Coalition (NDGLC) is to improve stewardship by providing education and technical assistance to producers regarding regenerative and profitable grazing management and building conservation awareness by educating citizens and policy makers. As part of this mission, the Coalition launched “Grazing Logic,” a series of grazing education events co-hosted with local partners on topics of interest to their communities, in 2024.

At each Grazing Logic event, NDGLC mentors and special guests share their knowledge and expertise with farmers and ranchers, resource professionals, and the public. The Coalition partners with soil conservation districts, North Dakota State University Extension county offices, and other conservation organizations (e.g., Audubon Great Plains, North Dakota Wildlife Federation, NRCS, Pheasants

Forever) to select topics of interest for host communities and promote the events. These topics have included winter grazing strategies, multi-species grazing, cover crops, soil health, electric and virtual fencing, and succession planning. The events are offered free of charge.



Trish Feiring

Grazing Logic builds awareness of the Coalition mentor network and the North Dakota Grazing Exchange tool for producers and resource professionals. Presenters speak to the importance of preserving the grasslands and incorporate topics for a broader audience like birding, plant identification, and pollinators.



The Coalition has hosted 10 Grazing Logic events to date, serving all five soil conservation district areas in North Dakota. Two more are already on the schedule for 2026. All Grazing Logic participants are invited to the annual Grassroots Grazing Summit in Bismarck.

On evaluations, attendees have indicated that they plan to test and implement many of the practices they learned about at Grazing Logic, including bale grazing, swath grazing, cell grazing, and estate planning.

“Very real topics and discussions were had on a difficult subject. Honesty and even openness in some areas was appreciated.

Diversity of content/perspective/experience was important. Appreciated hearing from younger operators and more experienced operators.

Local producers lend knowledge for local producers.”



Lesley Icenogle

The North Dakota Grazing Lands Coalition is grateful for the partnership and support of the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture as we work toward our vision of healthy grazing lands for today and future generations.





Scaling Up Migratory Bird Habitat

Ben Peterson / Delta Waterfowl

Delta Waterfowl

Paul Wait, Communications Director

Small wetland conservation continues to be a cornerstone priority of Delta Waterfowl.

From 1997 to 2009, an alarming 125,400 acres of wetlands disappeared across the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) in the United States. Most of those wetlands were small, shallow wetlands in crop fields, lost to drainage to grow grain. And since 2009, wetland loss rates appear to be accelerating.

Delta Waterfowl continues to work harder than ever to slow the tide of wetland losses and ensure ducks have breeding habitat. Delta scored a monumental win for ducks and duck hunters with the inclusion of the organization's innovative Working Wetlands program into the 2018 U.S. Farm Bill. Working Wetlands, following a successful five-year pilot project in North Dakota, has been implemented by the Natural Resource Conser-

vation Service initially as the Prairie Pothole Water Quality and Wildlife Program and more recently as the Migratory Bird Resurgence Initiative (MBRI). MBRI funding totaled \$3.4 million in the PPR states in 2024.

Delta's Policy Team continues to work in collaboration with Ducks Unlimited, the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, and government leaders to realize the full potential of the program to conserve small wetlands in the Dakotas, Minnesota, Iowa, and Montana – the U.S. portion of the PPR. Delta is advocating for \$50 million annually through a Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative to protect small wetlands, a measure which would conserve an estimated 336,276 acres of breeding waterfowl habitat in the PPR. At such scale, 56.7% percent of small wetlands would be conserved, supporting 507,524 breeding pairs of ducks.



In addition, Delta is pushing for \$25 million annually for wintering habitat – post-harvest flooding of rice acres – in Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and California. The allocation would create 500,000 acres of wintering grounds habitat for waterfowl by keeping water on the landscape for 90 consecutive days between Sept. 1 and March 1. Importantly, the program would provide a habitat base to support the historic distribution of ducks and duck hunters in the south and in California’s Central Valley.



Fred Greenslade / Delta Waterfowl

Delta appreciates the efforts of all partners working toward conserving critical habitat for ducks, including U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Habitat and Population Evaluation Team, which provided key information that was central to developing the MBHI proposal.



Fred Greenslade / Delta Waterfowl



USFWS





Bringing the Prairie to Life

Josh Anderson

North Dakota Natural Resources Trust

In September, high school students from North Valley Career and Technology Center swapped the classroom for the country, making a special trip to South Branch Bison Ranch near Grafton, North Dakota. There they explored the lush prairie, collecting seed heads, grasses, plants and soil. What they gathered became art.

With the help of a professional artist, the students learned how to transform soil samples into natural paint pigments. Handmade paper was made using fibers from plant materials. Plants and seeds were pressed into clay and glazed for dinner plates. Later, these plates will be used at a potluck dinner showcasing the artwork created by the students and lessons learned about the important relationship between soil health and prairies, the state's most important ecosystem.

Prior to their prairie visit, students first learned how to read soil maps, conduct soil sampling, identify key prairie plants, and met with land stewards who practice soil health principles. It was all part of a program called "Thinking Like a Prairie" led by the Walsh County Soil Conservation District in partnership with the North Valley Career and Technology Center, and made possible with funding from the North Dakota Natural Resources Trust's (NDNRT) Small Grant Program.

The NDNRT partners with organizations across the state, supporting conservation initiatives, education and outreach to the public about the value of our natural resources, including through its Small Grant Program. Since 2014, the Trust has awarded nearly 110 grants totaling over \$860,000.



Interest in grant supported projects has been strong, from potential grant recipients and the media. Recent projects funded include an educational podcast, public trails, a native plant walk, pollinator gardens, native prairie planting for educational use, nature parks and educational signage, classroom outreach and hands-on learning for students, nature-based community and public events, and educational workshops for teachers. The “Thinking Like a Prairie” program was featured in an article and podcast of a leading North Dakota newspaper and then picked up by other media outlets, generating visibility across the state.



Josh Anderson

Students at North Valley Career and Technology Center create paintings with pigments made from soils gathered from the prairie.

Conservation begins with public awareness.

Through the education and partnerships supported by the Trust’s Small Grant Program, people learn the value of grasslands and wetlands – inspiring them to take action to protect the ecosystems that sustain our land, water, wildlife and communities.

-Heather Husband, Meadowlark Initiative Coordinator



A \$25 Million Investment into Montana's Grasslands

Tony Bynum

Pheasants Forever Hunter VanDonsel, Montana State Coordinator

Pheasants Forever launched the Montana Grassland Initiative (MGI) in July of 2023 to strategically address threats to Montana's grasslands and ensure the Montana upland experience lasts forever. Rooted in the best available science through the grassland roadmap and sagebrush conservation design, the five-year initiative sets ambitious goals to impact 1.5 million acres of grassland by June 30th, 2028. The MGI strategy is centered around four categories: retaining intact grasslands, conserving vulnerable grasslands, restoring converted grasslands, and expanding public access to grasslands. Through the first two years over 475,000 acres of grasslands have been impacted. (Fig. 1)

In November of 2024, the US Department of Agriculture's Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) awarded \$25 million to the Montana Grasslands and Wildlife Cor-

ridors Project, a key effort nested within the MGI Framework. This investment provides a transformative opportunity to implement the MGI vision at the scale necessary. Over the next five years, the RCPP project will support conservation and stewardship across 120,000 acres of working lands and wildlife habitat. It will help ranching families keep their operations intact, safeguard migration corridors, and restore the ecological function of native prairie. And it will do so through the partnership driven model that defines MGI: landowners, agencies, nonprofits, sportsmen, and local communities working side by side.

Work has begun to ensure the monumental RCPP investment is translated into on the ground action. Our partnership has collaborated to define geospatial prioritization and ranking criteria for landowner applications through the RCPP.



We leveraged our extensive partner network with NGO's, Joint Ventures, and government agencies to multiply landowner outreach efforts. We launched two rounds of targeted radio advertising in key geographies to drive landowners to apply during our first batching period ending January 15th, 2026. Next, we will look to plan, review, rank, and preapprove project funding in spring of 2026.

The RCPP award positions the Montana Grassland Initiative to accelerate progress toward its five year goals: anchoring intact grasslands before they're lost, restoring altered prairie to functioning habitat, and strengthening the economic resilience of rural communities. Most importantly, it demonstrates that Montana's grasslands are not a story of decline, they are a story of possibility. With the right partners and the right resources, we can protect one of the most iconic landscapes in the American West for generations to come.

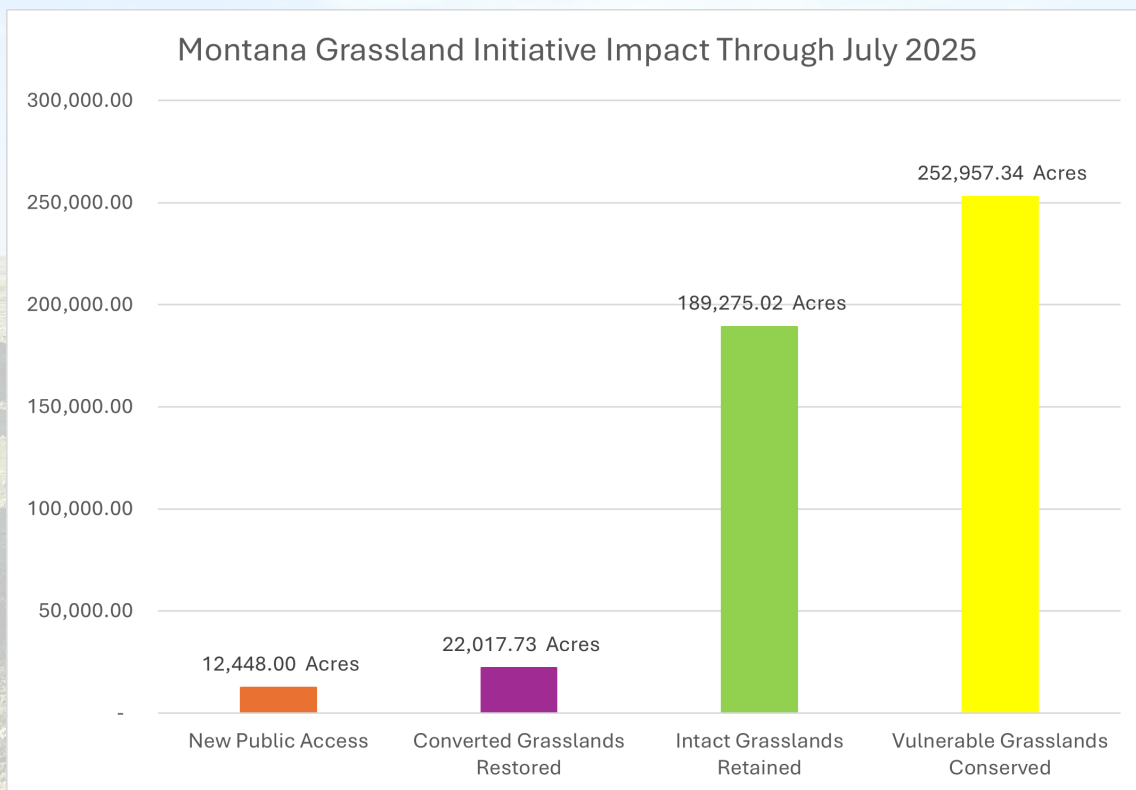


Figure 1: Chart showcasing MGI progress 2023 - 2025.





Producer Spotlight: Chris and ReEtta Sieh

John Pollman

Ducks Unlimited Matt Hubers, Agronomist

Caleb Caton and Matt Hubers – Ducks Unlimited (DU) agronomists – pull up to Chris and ReEtta Sieh’s farm in north-central South Dakota’s McPherson County, walk through an immaculately well-organized shop to a corner office where Chris greets them, followed by the smell of lasagna and freshly brewed coffee.

The Siehs operate thousands of acres in McPherson County. Looking east, the landscape is primarily flat crop fields, covering entire sections and quarters. Looking west, the landscape transitions to large tracts of native rangeland, rolling hills, valleys and draws, and a matrix of interspersed wetlands. Erosion is not a concern on the well-managed rangeland, but the region’s sensitive soils on crop fields are prone to wind and water erosion.

Unlike many local producers who stick to a corn-soybean rotation, the Siehs practice a more diverse crop rotation that typically includes corn, soybeans, small grains, rye, and various cover crops. They also incorporate sunflowers, peas, and lentils based on market conditions.

Diversity is the key to improving your soil, and with livestock, having those cover crops is a positive for both. You must take cover crops seriously and treat them with the same attention and detail as you treat your cash crops; they are every bit as important.

-Chris Sieh



Building up organic matter levels increased the ability of the Sieb's fields to hold more water through the growing season. Per acre, every percentage point of increased organic matter results in an additional 20,000 gallons of water-holding capacity in the soil. Chris says, "On a dry year, that can be the difference between growing a crop- or not."

Caleb and Matt conducted a Haney soil test as part of DU's cover crop program. The results showed the amounts of water-extractable carbon, the percentage of soil organic matter, CO2 burst results, and Phospholipid Fatty Acid amounts. Chris was surprised it was all tied to soil organic matter. The agronomists also discussed nitrogen fertilizer application recommendations based on soil health attributes that promise to improve profitability.

Chris and ReEtta are no strangers to implementing conservation practices on their own, utilizing USDA programs such as the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), and DU's Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

As the meeting concluded, Arden, another member of the Sieh family, stepped out to feed cows. Outside, a drying wind stirred up dust on the gravel road, signaling the challenges ahead. Yet, thanks to their innovative practices, the Siehs might weather the dry season better than others. It's reassuring to know DU's programs contribute to such resilience.



Caleb Caton





Grasslands Conference Highlights Challenges & Solutions

Julie Sibbing

National Wildlife Federation

Julie Sibbing, Associate Vice President for Land Stewardship

The Prairie Pothole Region was well represented among the more than 350 land managers, ranchers, academics, agency experts, and prairie enthusiasts gathered in Kearney, Nebraska in June, 2025 for the Seventh Biennial America's Grasslands Conference. The conference served as a forum for networking, partnership-building, presentations and discussions regarding the challenges facing grassland ecosystems, including woody encroachment and conversion to cropland.

Participants had opportunities to see some of the best intact grassland-wetland complexes on the Great Plains. Some participants took a day-long trip into the heart of the Sandhills, visiting the Dailey Angus Ranch, Paxton Ranch, and Santo Land & Cattle, where ranching families discussed managed grazing strategies, the growing use of prescribed fire, and partnerships with the US Forest Service

to conserve and protect the grasslands and fens that make the Sandhills a productive cattle region.

Other participants spent the day in the Loess Canyons in west-central Nebraska, learning how the Loess Canyons Rangeland Alliance organizes landowners around large-scale reintroduction of fire into the landscape to manage eastern red cedar encroachment in the area's steep terrain. Monitoring shows the management changes have increased grassland bird richness.

Some visited the wet meadows, tallgrass, and mixed grass prairie and restored grassland along the Platte River on Crane Trust and Nature Conservancy land.



Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary hosted a dinner for the conference at their 5,000-acre mix of native and restored prairie, riparian wetlands and farmland along five miles of the Platte River.

More than 80 presentations, discussions and workshops covered a variety of topics including planning, management, monitoring, financing, policy, conservation, and generational transition. Many touched on the impacts of woody encroachment and grassland conversion, strategies to address them, and the wildlife impacts of management decisions.

One hot topic discussed was the proposed North American Grasslands Conservation Act, an idea that was hatched and developed at past America's Grasslands conferences. The legislation would help fund and better coordinate grassland conservation efforts. The bill was introduced in the last session of Congress and is due to be reintroduced this year.

The America's Grasslands Conference is organized by the National Wildlife Federation. Last year's conference was co-hosted by the Nebraska Grazing Lands Alliance and the University of Nebraska's Center for Grasslands Studies. Planning is currently underway for the next conference in 2027. Visit the [web site](#) to learn more and to access conference proceedings.





Prairie Pothole JOINT VENTURE

922 Bootlegger Trail | Great Falls, MT

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