Prairie Pothole
JOINT VENTURE

WORKING LANDS CONSERVATION IN THE PRAIRIE POTHOLE REGION


Kurt Forman

Across the U.S. Prairie Pothole Region (PPR), grassland loss occurs at an alarming rate. This is echoed throughout the North American Great Plains, making it one of the most threatened and least protected ecosystems on the planet. A driving force behind this is conversion of grassland to croplands, which largely occurs on marginal soils that result in low crop yields and has high costs to birds, water quality, and soil health. Nearly 70% of the original grasslands now support crop production.

The loss of grassland habitat has dramatic impacts on wildlife populations, especially grassland birds, which have been declining faster than any other avian guild over the last 40 years. This is not restricted to wildlife alone, as impacts to water quality, carbon sequestration, recreational activities, and other ecosystem services have wide-reaching implications for people living in the PPR and well beyond.

An estimated 875,000 acres of grassland were lost in the PPR of Montana, South Dakota, and North Dakota between 1997-2009.

With 90% of the PPR privately owned, it has never been more important for conservation organizations to partner with the stewards of this imperiled landscape - ranchers.

Collaborating to protect grasslands through voluntary conservation on working lands is vital. Effective techniques for conserving grassland and wetland habitat include a suite of incentives and stewardship programs for landowners.

- Voluntary easements, such as ACEP-Agricultural Land Easements, protect both agricultural uses and conservation values.
- Collaborative efforts to transition expiring CRP to working grasslands provide opportunities to meet bird conservation objectives and retain carbon stores.
- Assistance offered by PPJV partners includes perpetual easements or term-limited leases, managed grazing systems, soil health programs, wetland and grassland restoration, and more!


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Conserving native rangeland directly benefits a host of grassland-dependent bird species. Improvements in grazing management yield positive results not only for the landowner and their operation, but also for the wildlife that depend on the land, making this a win-win approach. By approaching their operation holistically, producers maintain a system that benefits far more than just their cattle.

- Cattle grazing creates diversity in plant density and height, which sustains biodiversity by enabling new growth to occur and creating favorable habitat for grassland bird species.

- Grazing management is effective for maintaining and increasing carbon storage. Carbon sequestration strategies in grazing systems can be highly effective in offsetting greenhouse gas emissions from livestock.

Collaborating with landowners to protect native grasslands through voluntary programs is an essential part of protecting, restoring, and enhancing this landscape.

Doing so will enable resilient grassland resources and thriving ranching communities to endure through countless generations.

Charlie Dickie for the SD Grassland Coalition and USDA-NRCS

Get Involved

Visit our partners' websites to learn more:

NORTH DAKOTA GRAZING LANDS COALITION

SOUTH DAKOTA GRASSLAND COALITION

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Partners for Fish & Wildlife

And Support your Local Rancher!

Prairie Pothole JOINT VENTURE

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