USDA United States Department of Agriculture

SUPPORTING AMERICA'S WORKING LANDS

WORKING LANDS ★ FOR ★ WILDLIFE

Natural Resources Conservation Service

Working Lands for Wildlife

Resilient working lands create abundant wildlife and healthy communities.

Across America, forward-looking private agricultural producers are partnering with Working Lands for Wildlife to improve habitat and their bottom line on more than 9.3 million acres of forests, streams, rangelands, and farms.

Across the Great Plains, ranchers are partnering with WLFW to improve their agricultural operations while helping grassland songbirds and other wildlife thrive.

Working Lands for Wildlife has partnered with over 6,500 landowners to improve their lands for wildlife and agriculture.

Working Lands for Wildlife

"Take care of the land and the land will take care of you."

—Hugh Hammond Bennett, First Chief, Soil Conservation Service

"Conservation will ultimately boil down to rewarding the private landowner who conserves the public interest."

—Aldo Leopold, Father of Modern Conservation

Two-thirds of the land in the lower 48 states is privately owned, much of it as working agricultural land. These farms, ranches and forests produce much of our country's food and fiber and are the backbone of rural communities. Working lands also provide clean water, recreational opportunities, and abundant wildlife habitat. USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) partners with agricultural producers to ensure these lands are healthy, productive and resilient long into the future.

Through Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW), the NRCS has created a win-win model of private lands conservation that benefits wildlife and people that now includes conservation efforts focused on 19 diverse landscapes in 48 states.

WLFW is internationally recognized as a successful conservation paradigm because it's outcome-focused, science-based, and partnership-driven. We recognize that many hands make lighter work and that wildlife doesn't stop at fences. That's why WLFW ensures conservation efforts bridge public and private land, that a variety of local partners are involved, and that each project is designed to meet the needs of individual producers.

WLFW builds on decades of conservation efforts with forward-looking producers stepping up to improve working lands for wildlife and people. We're proud of our collective past achievements and look forward to continuing our work with America's private landowners to conserve these landscapes for future generations.

In the Midwest, WLFW is creating valuable butterfly habitat by establishing milkweed plants on agricultural lands. Monarch butterflies now occupy nearly 95 percent of these managed sites, and other pollinators benefit from the same conservation practices.

WLFW Elements for Success

"Thanks to forward-thinking producers from across the country, the future is bright for maintaining our nation's spectacular natural resources and invaluable working lands. The WLFW model provides a recipe to continue to conserve what makes America special."

—Tim Griffiths, West Working Lands for Wildlife Coordinator

From the green hills of Appalachia to the Great Plains grasslands and from the bayous of Louisiana to Rocky Mountain rivers, America's farmers, ranchers, and foresters are partnering with WLFW to create resilient and productive lands.

Everyone benefits when we work together to restore clean water and healthy soils and when we keep agricultural land working and intact. The following ingredients of our win-win approach are why the WLFW model of conservation has been so successful.

Trust and Credibility: Taking a community, grassroots approach to conservation that is based on the principles of neighborliness.

Shared Vision: Finding the common link between wildlife, agriculture, and forestry that invites cooperation over conflict.

Strategic Approach: Directing resources where the biological returns are the highest.

Accountability: Using science to measure conservation effectiveness and quantify resulting outcomes.

Leverage: Multiplying investments through partnerships that achieve more conservation.

Regulatory Predictability: ESA predictability provides peace of mind to participating landowners so that they can enact conservation without concern over additional requirements if the species becomes listed under the ESA.

Trust and Credibility

NRCS Working Lands for Wildlife works side by side with landowners to support productive working lands.

Each year, Working Lands for Wildlife hosts workshops and field tours that bring together landowners, NRCS staff and partners who learn from each other about how to craft proactive solutions to conservation challenges.

Whether in the field or over the hood of a pickup, WLFW's successful approach hinges on trust forged through personal connections.

Trust and Credibility

Government Agencies, Partners and Landowners Work Together

"I drove halfway across the country for a WLFW workshop and found ranchers battling the same concerns as us—and in some cases, doing more with less."

—Russell Blew, Kansas Rancher

Successful voluntary conservation is built on the foundation of solid, trusting relationships. NRCS draws on a long history of helping people help the land. For more than 80 years, NRCS has worked in close partnership with farmers and ranchers, local and state governments, and federal agencies to maintain healthy and productive working landscapes. WLFW carries on this tradition.

Coming Together

Smoke billows from a big black barbecue as two hundred people clamber down from yellow school buses and head inside a sprawling barn. The group has just finished a tour of this Utah ranch, where they learned how removing invading conifer trees and restoring wet meadows has boosted the landowner's cattle operation.

Welcome to the Western Working Lands for Wildlife workshop, an annual event that brings diverse people together to share ideas, swap stories, and celebrate private land conservation.

A call rises from the din: "Lunch is ready!" As people feast on local beef, ranchers from Kansas joke with bird biologists from Colorado, and NRCS range conservationists from South Dakota talk shop with Bureau of Land Management field techs from California.

Sharing lunch in a barn, sitting down at a kitchen table for coffee, talking openly and honestly. These are the ways NRCS is helping to build trust and lasting relationships, which, in turn, helps ensure working lands are healthy and resilient long into the future.

Shared Vision

Conservation improvements are a win-win, both for agricultural producers and wildlife.

Livestock producers in the central and eastern U.S. are partnering with WLFW to offer more wildlife-friendly options than fescue—which can reduce calf weight and diminish wildlife habitat—like native grasses that improve herd health and bobwhite quail populations.

Bobwhite quail, a popular grassland game bird, have declined by 80% since the 1960s. Incorporation of native grasses into grazing operations improves bobwhite quail habitat and offers alternative forage during droughts.

Shared Vision

Conserving the Landscape, Benefiting Agriculture and Wildlife

“I feel fortunate to have a diversity of wildlife and plants on my acreage with 50 species of birds including bobwhite quail and wild turkey, along with species like fox squirrel and gopher tortoise. This adds greatly to my family’s enjoyment of the property and my determination to maintain it. ”

—Greg Nelms, landowner in Montgomery County, Georgia

Wildlife and agriculture can thrive in harmony—that’s the heart of the vision that WLFW shares with landowners and partners. In the case of ranching on rangelands and grasslands that are home to at-risk species like bobwhites, sage grouse or grassland songbirds, that translates to an even simpler truth: what’s good for the herd is good for the bird.

Beef and Bobs

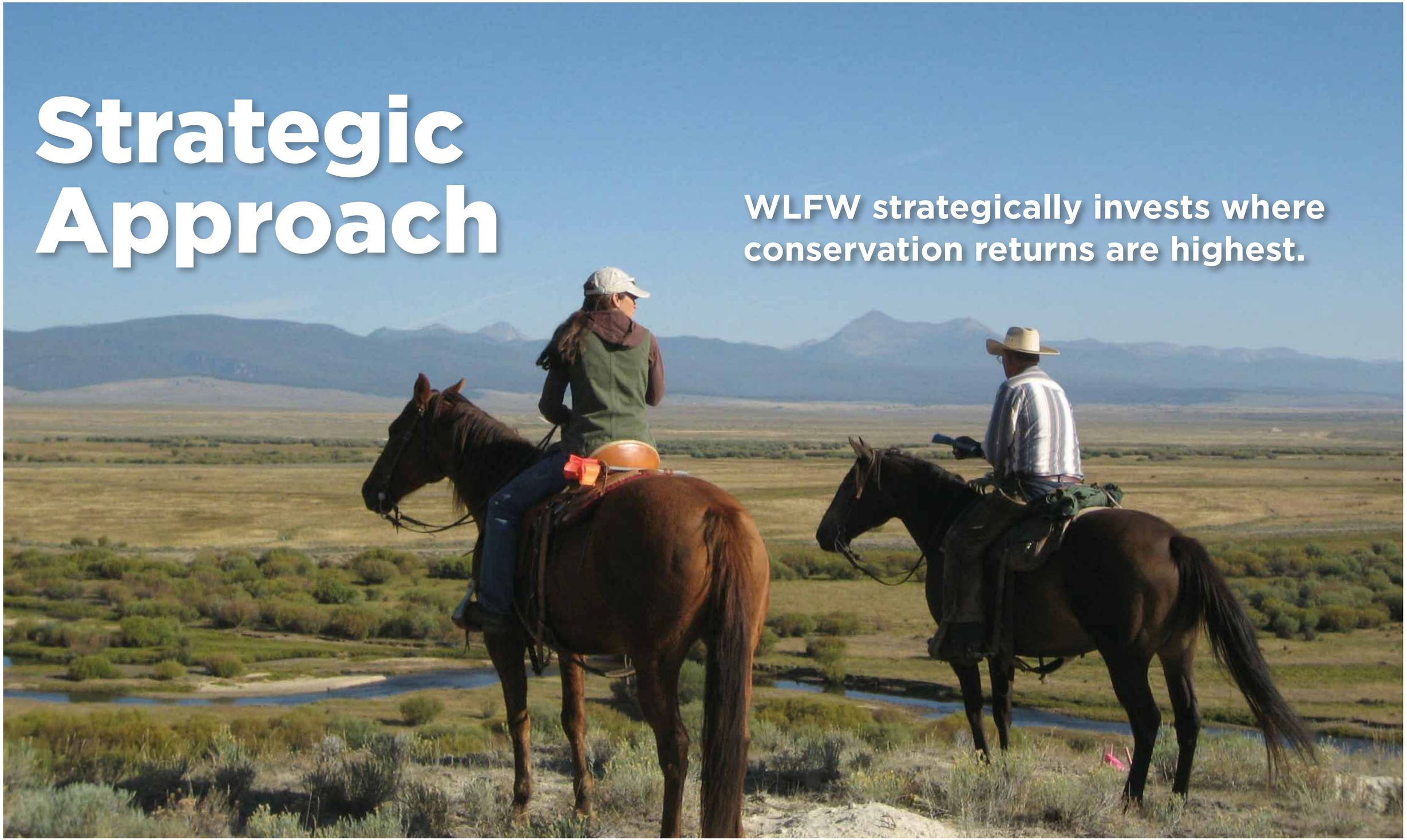
Before World War II, ranchers from the central and eastern states relied on native plants for forage. These plants helped make the region a cattle-growing powerhouse and supported abundant wildlife species, like the bobwhite quail.

But as livestock producers began replacing native warm-season grasses with cool-season tall fescue grasses, cattle began to get sick. Fescue is hardy and grows profusely, but it also harbors a fungus that causes “fescue toxicity.” Studies have shown that cattle grazing on native grasses have a 66% higher growth rate in summer than those grazing on fescue. Wildlife species also dwindled as fescue took over. Bobwhite quail, for example, have declined by 80% since the 1960s, in large part due to grassland declines.

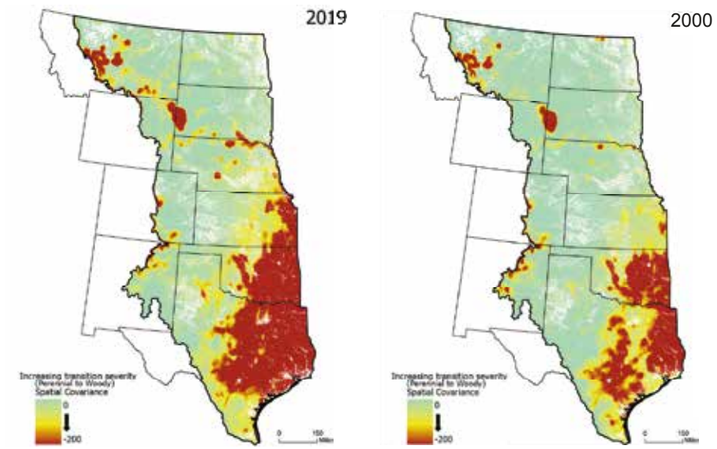
Today, producers in the “Fescue Belt” are partnering with WLFW to replace fescue pastures with native grasses. This improves their bottom line while also benefiting bobwhite populations. Restoring warm-season grasses helps maintain healthy livestock herds, and also provides livestock with forage during late summer—and during droughts—when cool-season grasses die off.

Strategic Approach

WLFW strategically invests where conservation returns are highest.



Woody species like eastern redcedar have overtaken grasslands in the Great Plains in the absence of fire. Strategically cutting trees and reintroducing fire restores productive prairies for ranchers and wildlife.



Using the newest mapping technologies, WLFW-sponsored scientists are helping NRCS and partners track vegetation change and implement new strategies to get ahead of threats like woody expansion.

Greater prairie chickens are one of a host of grassland-dependent birds that benefit from eastern redcedar management.

Strategic Approach

Focus Where Success Will Be Highest

Since America's working lands are vast, WLFW uses science-based tools to target conservation resources where they can be most beneficial. We empower landowners and resource managers with up-to-date information to help make decisions that lead to profitable livestock production, sustainable habitat, healthy soils, productive forests, and clean water.

"New technology helps agencies and landowners pinpoint priority areas for conservation where we can invest limited resources to boost the productivity of grazing lands and benefit wildlife."

—Dirac Twidwell, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Technology Helps Restore Productive Prairies

As European immigrants settled the Great Plains, they transformed America's prairies into productive farms and ranches. These settlers also planted trees for shade and put out the wildfires that historically helped stimulate grass growth and keep trees in check. Today, America's prairies are being overtaken by expanding woody species like eastern redcedar and mesquite, which suck up precious water, degrade wildlife habitat, and crowd out nutritious forage.

Ranchers in Nebraska's famed Sandhills region are working to address eastern redcedar invasion. This threat to working grasslands is currently impacting 30,000 acres annually—reducing livestock forage by 50% and degrading wildlife habitat. As WLFW helps ratchet up restoration of healthy grasslands in Nebraska, resulting actions also benefit critically endangered burying beetles, grassland birds, and other wildlife species.

Accountability

Using science to measure conservation effectiveness and quantify resulting outcomes.

In eastern forests, sustainable timber harvests open tree canopies to benefit a host of migratory birds while seasonally providing flowering shrubs that attract pollinators.

In the West, WLFW is helping landowners improve water availability and livestock forage by removing encroaching conifer trees and restoring valuable wet meadows. These efforts benefit the at-risk sage grouse, along with 80% of all western wildlife species that depend on wet habitats to survive.

Accountability

Measuring Outcomes Improves Conservation Effectiveness

"Outcome-focused science helps demonstrate the efficacy of our work, improves our conservation practices, and ensures we're accountable and transparent with Farm Bill funding."

—Dr. Dave Naugle, WLFW Science Advisor

Effective conservation is based on science, first to pinpoint where to invest resources and second to evaluate whether Farm Bill-funded practices are working. Measuring outcomes from WLFW projects—rather than simply quantifying outputs—provides accountability to the landowners, partners, and taxpayers who support our efforts.

Measuring Success

On a family-owned hardwood forest in Pennsylvania, scientists hike through regenerating young forests to monitor golden-winged warbler, American woodcock, and native pollinators. In an agricultural field in Oklahoma, volunteers count Monarch butterfly chrysalises nestled beneath pink milkweed under the bright spring sunshine. On a rolling sagebrush plateau in Montana, a remote triggered wildlife camera captures a herd of elk grazing on a rancher's newly restored wet meadow.

All of these are real-life scenarios. Across America, teams of researchers are studying how WLFW conservation practices play out for focal species and the landowners with whom we work.

We invest in science that quantifies a diversity of outcomes to ensure NRCS conservation investments are making a difference on the ground—and to modify our practices if they aren't. Since peer-reviewed science is the gold-standard for vetting research findings, WLFW-affiliated researchers also publish dozens of studies in prestigious scientific journals.

And we don't stop there. WLFW also "translates" conservation science into practical tools that equip landowners and partners with the best available information when making decisions about their operations. This provides more than just accountability—it gives people confidence, too.

Leverage

Working together allows us to leverage more resources to multiply outcomes.

In the Appalachians, the WLFW partnership is improving forest health by implementing sustainable forestry practices that address many factors threatening the economic value of eastern forests and the viability of the region's rich biological diversity.

Landowners improve the economic value of their forest stands and 90% of the contracts go to private loggers from their communities.

Imperiled golden-winged warblers are making a comeback in restored sites with occupancy exceeding 80% where reproduction is high. These same working lands are also home to native pollinators for up to six years post-restoration.

Leverage

Neighboring Up to Benefit More People and Wildlife

"Our partnerships lead to better relationships with landowners, more helping hands in the field, and a bigger return on investment for the rural communities where we work."

—Dan Rider, Stewardship Manager, Forest Service, Maryland Department of Natural Resources

By partnering with local, state, and federal groups, WLFW is able to exponentially leverage Farm Bill resources and deliver more on-the-ground conservation results.

Supporting Family Forests in Appalachia

In the northeastern U.S., partners are helping reinvigorate private forestry as a viable—and sustainable—industry. After decades of harvesting valuable trees from forests and leaving the rest, eastern deciduous forests are a monoculture of same-age or same-species trees, lacking both market value and healthy wildlife populations. WLFW "hit the reset button" by working with forest owners to establish young forest stands and restore economic value and abundant wildlife such as white-tailed deer, turkey, ruffed grouse, and rarer species like the golden-winged warbler.

The golden-winged warbler is currently being considered for ESA protection but NRCS and partners are cooperating with forest landowners to proactively restore forest health and benefit this migratory species.

With financial and technical support from NRCS, state agencies, and non-profit groups, landowners are hiring local, small-scale family businesses to restore young forests to promote the regrowth of varied oak and hickory stands that wildlife depend upon. Plus, landowners end up with healthier, more valuable forests for generations to come.

Regulatory Predictability

ESA predictability provides peace of mind to participating landowners so they can enact conservation without concern over additional requirements if the species becomes listed under the ESA.

Across 11 western states, more than 2,100 ranchers have partnered with WLFW through the Sage Grouse Initiative to conserve millions of acres of western rangeland.

Sage grouse and 350 other species share a brighter future thanks to the efforts of ranchers and partners through WLFW.

Large-scale conservation of western rangelands, much of it through WLFW, resulted in an historic no-list ESA decision for sage grouse.

Regulatory Predictability

Keeping Agricultural Lands Working for Future Generations

“As ranchers we used to participate in species conservation efforts out of fear. Through the partnerships that have been built, today we participate out of pride.”

—Jim Magagna, Executive VP, Wyoming Stockgrowers Association

Producers rely on their lands for their livelihoods. Removing uncertainty allows them to more confidently plan for the future and to ensure these working lands remain with the families who have cared for them for generations.

Providing Peace of Mind

Rich in wildlife and history, the vast sagebrush rangelands of the American West are home to 350 species and thousands of hard-working ranching families who have lived here for generations. This is where WLFW first began in 2010 to model whether a proactive, voluntary conservation action could be viewed as equally important as regulatory mechanisms to proactively conserve imperiled species to the requirements of the Endangered Species Act.

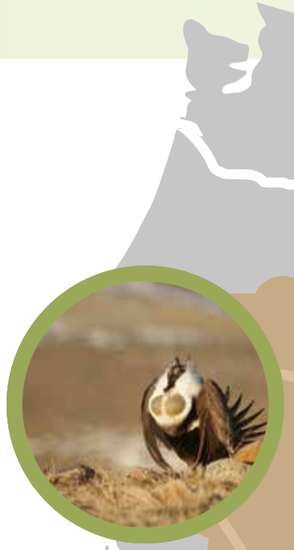
By any measure, the Sage Grouse Initiative has been a monumental success: more than 2,000 ranchers have enrolled in sustainable practices that benefit the bird and their herds, conserving an area more than triple the size of Yellowstone National Park, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided sage grouse no longer warranted listing under the ESA.

Five years after the no-list decision, sagebrush-based ranchers are still lining up to participate. That’s because producers welcome the certainty of knowing WLFW will make their lands more productive and more valuable long into the future.

Participants receive some protections from future regulations if sage grouse are ever listed under the ESA. But more importantly, producers who sign up for rangeland conservation practices know that their ranch will better withstand the next drought or wildfire, and that their children can continue to earn a living from the lands they grew up on.

Conserving landscapes through focal species

In addition to these eight national priorities, WLFW works with private landowners on more than a dozen other state-identified focal species.



SAGE-GROUSE
Conserving healthy sagebrush rangelands

PRAIRIE-CHICKEN
Supporting resilient grasslands

SOUTHWESTERN WILLOW FLYCATCHER
Restoring riparian habitat

MONARCH BUTTERFLY
Restoring habitat in marginal agriculture lands

GOLDEN-WINGED WARBLER
Restoring forest health

GOPHER TORTOISE
Restoring longleaf pine forests

NEW ENGLAND COTTONTAIL
Restoring forest health

BOG TURTLE
Enhancing and protecting wetlands

Looking to the Future

Making Conservation Work

“We are thrilled to be part of the Working Lands for Wildlife collaborative approach to conservation. This partnership between ranchers, government agencies, corporations, and non-profits has made the sage grouse the emblematic bird of collaborative conservation and the Working Lands for Wildlife approach the model that is now being exported to every ecosystem in America.”

—Howard Vincent, President and CEO of Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever

Winds of change are blowing across the working landscapes that define so much of America. No longer are healthy wildlife populations and productive agricultural lands seen as opposing forces. Instead, we now know that sustainable farms, forests, and ranches go hand-in-hand with abundant wildlife, clean water, and healthy soils.

Win-Win Solutions Are Here to Stay

As WLFW has matured, we’ve adapted our approach and learned from the outcome-focused science we produce. WLFW still targets specific at-risk species, since they serve as barometers for the health of our landscape. But our strategy to conserve large, intact working landscapes benefits much more than a single species—entire ecosystems reap the benefits, along with rural communities.

The results speak for themselves: our voluntary, incentive-based approach works for landowners by making America’s farms, ranches, and forests more productive. By picking the right improvements for the land, we benefited fish and wildlife too, several of which no longer require protection under the Endangered Species Act. Recognizing the overwhelming success of our private land conservation model, the 2018 Farm Bill formally codified WLFW.

That’s great news for the thousands of producers who now partner with NRCS through WLFW—and the thousands more who will in the future. It’s also great news for the countless wildlife species that are also benefiting, thanks to Farm Bill conservation investments.

Aldo Leopold was right: conservation can only succeed with the participation of private landowners. WLFW provides a time-tested model and an effective recipe for partnering with the agricultural landowners who will steward America’s valuable working lands long into the future.

The eastern hellbender—the only giant salamander endemic to the U.S.— needs clean, clear streams to survive. The NRCS and local partners are supporting land management practices that reduce sediment in streams and improve water quality. This benefits the hellbender, a host of aquatic wildlife, herd health, and downstream communities.

Credits

Printed: February 2021
Design: Jennifer Cole, FPAC Business Center
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Photos: Front cover: NRCS (all). Inside front cover & Page 1: Craig Zerbe/Adobe. Page 2: Sodel Vladyslav/Adobe (top), John Sutton (small, left), Jeremy Roberts (small, right). Page 3: NRCS (top), Courtesy of the Aldo Leopold Foundation (bottom). Page 4: Courtesy of Pheasants Forever (top), Mark Herreid/Adobe (small, left), NRCS (small, right). Page 5: NRCS. Pages 6-7: NRCS. Page 8: Greg M. Peters (top), NRCS (small, left), Sandra Murphy (small, right). Page 9: Brianna Randall. Pages 10-11: Ken Miracle. Page 12: NRCS (top), Courtesy of Pheasants Forever (small, left), NRCS (small, right). Page 13: Courtesy of Greg Nelms. Pages 14-15: Montana, Fish, Wildlife & Parks. Page 16: Aron Flanders, USFWS (top two photos), NRCS (map), USFWS-Mountain Prairie Region (small, right). Page 17: Courtesy of Dirac Twidwell. Pages 18-19: Bill Hawthorne. Page 20: Jeff Larkin (top), Jeremy Roberts (small, left), Jami/Adobe (small, right). Page 21: Courtesy of Dave Naugle. Pages 22-23: Anabranch Solutions. Page 24: Matthew Cimitile (top), NRCS (small, left), D.J. McNeil (small, right). Page 25: Courtesy of Dan Rider. Pages 26-27: Courtesy of Pat O’Toole. Page 28: Tatiana Gettelman, USGS (top), Ken Miracle (small, left), Tim Griffiths (small, right). Page 29: Courtesy of Jim Magagna. Pages 30-31: Jennifer Cole (map design). Page 32: Tim Griffiths. Inside back cover: Michael Knoerr (top & small, left), Courtesy of Morgan Harris (small, right). Back cover: NRCS (farm), Julia Held/Adobe (nene goose), Juliana Swenson/Adobe (cactus).

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