

Central Grasslands Roadmap Policy Workgroup
Farm Bill Priority Talking Points
April 2023

Eliminate conversion in agricultural supply chains Congress should eliminate Farm Bill policies that incentivize and de-risk the conversion of critical habitats, particularly on lands marginal for agriculture, such as the Central Grasslands. Reducing crop insurance subsidies on newly converted and marginal lands would reduce both the climate impact caused by grassland conversion and the economic risks of farming in climate vulnerable areas. Congress should:

- Strengthen Sodsaver to eliminate crop insurance subsidies on newly converted grasslands.
- Require USDA to report native sod conversion data to Congress and the public annually.

Conserve and restore native and natural ecosystems. Intact native and natural habitats are vital to our agricultural economy and landscapes' ability to store vast amounts of carbon and support biodiverse, resilient ecosystems. Congress should significantly improve the role of the Grassland Conservation Reserve Program by providing the option of longer contracts, increasing targeting of acres to vulnerable and critical intact areas by designating core and vulnerable areas of the Central Grasslands as a Grasslands CRP National Priority Zone, and providing enhanced support for sustainable grazing in Grasslands CRP with improved incentives and technical assistance for rotational grazing with rest. The Central Grasslands Roadmap [Assessment Map](#) is a useful resource. NRCS supports and contributes to the Central Grasslands Roadmap via its [Framework for Conservation Action in the Great Plains Grasslands Biome](#).

Crop Insurance: Whole Farm Revenue Protection (WFRP) provides a risk management safety net for all commodities on the farm under one insurance policy and is available nationwide (specialty or organic commodities (crops and livestock), or those marketing to local, regional, farm-identity preserved, specialty, or direct markets). By supporting a diversity of farmers, crop diversity, and integrated operations, WFRP is an important tool for promoting climate resilience and grass-based agriculture. Direct RMA to:

- Prohibit the adjustment of price and production expectations at the time of a loss claim, which compromises farmers' confidence in the product, and strengthen the diversification incentive by raising the eligible commodity floor from two to three commodities; and
- Incentivize crop insurance agents to write full farm policies by ensuring compensation rates incorporate and reward the time and complexity required to write WFRP plans.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP):

Congress should strengthen co-benefit outcomes from EQIP and CSP by directing NRCS to:

- Expand the funding pools for priority wildlife initiatives and prioritize wildlife practices and enhancements in EQIP and CSP that benefit federally protected, candidate, state-listed, culturally significant, and other priority species identified in existing wildlife conservation plans, such as State Wildlife Action Plans, Partners in Flight Conservation Plans, State of the Birds Report, and the North American Waterfowl Management Plan.
 - Direct NRCS to create extended (5+ years) and facilitated secondary application options for threatened and endangered (T&E), candidate, and culturally significant species, especially species involved in priority initiatives and projects that create corridors or otherwise enable wildlife migration through agricultural systems. Direct NRCS to ensure needed updates and adaptations are made to practice standards to achieve the

objectives of T&E, culturally significant, and priority species, such as grassland birds (which have declined by as much as 80% throughout the Central Grasslands) . Key species to prioritize in the Central Grasslands include bison, black footed ferrets, declining grassland bird species, and pollinators. Also include relevant big game migratory corridors. The Central Grassland Roadmap scorecard is a valuable resource for identifying key species NRCS should reward states that pursue this approach at the state level with additional technical and financial resources as they are available.

- Within the 50% of total EQIP funding set aside for livestock operations at the national level, increase attention to and outcomes for climate, water quality, water quantity, and biodiversity by directing NRCS to prioritize ranking and technical support for adoption of advanced grazing management in EQIP and CSP, create extended contract options (5+ years), and facilitate re-enrollment to sustain this valuable practice for extended periods.
- Maintain or increase baseline EQIP and CSP funding.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program: Streamline the process so doesn't take years to get agreements to the finish line. Increase funds available to meet the demand for easements. Provide short, long term and perpetual easement options. For grasslands, prioritize enrollment in the green and yellow areas of the Central Grassland Roadmap Assessment map.

Guidance on stacking programs: USDA has initiated some limited pilots that have enabled producers to "stack" programs that are complimentary without duplicating incentives or payments. This includes a "habitat lease" pilot that enables ranchers to participate in both Grassland CRP and EQIP to deliver increased benefits for grasslands conservation, sustainable grazing, and wildlife benefits than could be accomplished from just one program. Stacking programs, especially across separate USDA agencies (i.e. FSA and NRCS) remains challenging, however. Congress should provide high level guidance that facilitates this highly beneficial approach and enables many more producers to stack different Farm Bill program benefits in ways that fit their specific requirements.

Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA): CTA provides our nation's producers with the knowledge and tools they need to conserve, maintain and restore the natural resources on their lands and improve the health of their operations for the future. To enhance this critical resource, Congress should:

- Create Tribal liaison between FSA, NRCS and Tribes to enhance communication, coordination, and engagement for Tribal partners and producers. Prioritize educational outreach to Tribes emphasizing the value of indigenous traditional, ecological, knowledge-based (ITEK), regenerative ag, and technologies for sustainable management of grasslands and broader agricultural lands.
- Direct USDA to explicitly allow a Tribe or a group of Tribes within a state or region to develop ITEK technical standards that will control the implementation of conservation projects allowed under the Farm Bill.
- Significantly increase funding for CTA so that NRCS can hire more staff and build capacity to meet the needs of today's increasingly diverse farming and ranching populations and the conservation challenges they face.
- Direct USDA to improve agency outreach and communications to diverse and underserved populations like Native and historically underserved producers, especially given difficulties meeting short enrollment deadlines, lack of access to information by historically underserved producers, and misalignment between Native land leases and NRCS enrollment periods.
- Bolster resources and staff to increase availability and access of technical service providers for Native Nations, heirs' property owners, and other underserved producers through dedicated

funding for Tribal conservation districts and landowner survey support for heirs' property owners. CSP and EQIP require producers to have conservation plans prior to enrollment, yet most Native Nations lack access to technical service providers who help develop those conservation plans.

Increase research support: Research and extension services are vital to improving the resiliency of Tribal food systems. However, agricultural extension resources serving Tribal lands are severely underfunded, and Tribal agricultural research priorities are rarely considered outside of Tribal Colleges and Universities context. To address this gap, Congress should:

- Provide sufficient funding for the Federally Recognized Tribal Extension Program (FRTEP) to increase the number of FRTEP extension agents and expand Tribal extension to levels comparable to extension services at land grant institutions.
- Direct the Agriculture Research Service to launch and support more projects that focus on the role that traditional ecological knowledge plays in the environmental and natural resource and ecological arenas as well as the food science, nutrition, and health arenas. An emphasis on projects that highlight the holistic, multi-focus approach of an Indigenous concept that everything is connected.
- Create a separate funding authority (like Sun Grant or Sea Grant authorities) for that allow multi-Tribal, multi-state, and consortium approaches to meet the research, education, and extension needs of Native nations.
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Equity and Inclusion

While much progress has been made in increasing equitable access to USDA programs for underserved and marginalized communities, significantly more is needed. Congress should:

- Increase designated funding within EQIP and CSP for beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers to 20 percent.
- Apply "638" self-determination contract opportunities to Conservation Title programs, which would enable Tribal governments to directly administer Conservation Title programs to eligible Tribal producers. This would acknowledge Tribal sovereignty and make program access easier for Native producers.
- Improve access to USDA conservation programs by directing USDA to enact special provisions to ensure that any Tribal government-allowed entity can access conservation programs and technical assistance on tribal lands as the recognized conservation program participant, not just individual producers.
- Tribes face significant challenges meeting federal match requirements, given the degree to which Tribal funding is federal and so ineligible as match. Reduce or waive match and cost share requirements on Tribes in EQIP, CSP, ACEP, CIG, RCPP, and CRP to increase access to and participation by Tribal interests in these priority USDA conservation programs.
- Understand that there is no one size fits all approach and equitable inclusion of Native nations requires ongoing learning and adaptation. Each of the hundreds of Native nations in the US is unique in its situations, structures, self-governance and resource management. To provide meaningful conservation assistance to Native nations, USDA must engage in a partnership process to co-design and co-develop the assistance with those Native nations.