



CONSERVING THE NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS

A World Wildlife Fund Donor Report

NOVEMBER 2018

1.



SUSTAINABLE RANCHING

Ranch Transition Pilot Project Gets the Green Light

Seventy percent of US farmland will change hands in the next two decades—that translates to more than 56 million acres at risk in the Northern Great Plains (NGP). Working with ranchers in the region, we regularly hear about this concern. For us, transitioning the ranch to someone in the next generation with a strong land ethic directly relates to conserving grasslands. This year, WWF partnered with the Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition to test a solution developed with partners across the NGP states. The program will begin with an educational workshop on succession planning, followed by an extended partnership with a “transition facilitator.” The transition facilitator will keep the rancher’s planning process in motion. The pilot will begin in January 2019 with up to 20 participating ranchers. After testing the concept in Nebraska, WWF hopes to scale the approach and bring on additional succession facilitators to engage more ranchers. With the typical NGP ranch averaging 5,000 acres, this project has the potential to make a significant conservation impact at-scale.



Above: © All Photos Day's Edge / WWF-US
On the Cover, From top: 1,3,4. © WWF-US / Clay Bolt ; 2. © Conservation Media / WWF-US

2. **BISON***Partnerships Help Grow Bison Herds*

In partnership with WWF and other supporters, Fort Peck Reservation in northeastern Montana made great strides toward increasing the resiliency and sustainability of their bison program. Fort Peck also contributed to bison restoration on a broader scale by committing to send genetically important Yellowstone bison to Rosebud, Wind River, and Fort Belknap Reservations.

Expanding a bison herd can present many challenges, including a significant monetary burden. WWF worked with Fort Peck to strengthen the financial position of their buffalo program by introducing the community to new partners and markets. This past year, the community was able to double the returns from their production bison herd by creating an online hunting license sales site and building new relationships with Wild Idea Buffalo Company and Native American Natural Foods. Also, thanks to new planning measures, Fort Peck will double the healthy bison meat it shares with the community. Each day, Fort Peck moves closer to greater conservation, economic, and social outcomes as a result of its commitment to restoring plains bison to tribal lands.



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3.



SCIENCE

Soil Suitability Analysis Helps Target Conservation Resources

A driving force in conversion and restoration of grasslands is their suitability for growing crops. This year, WWF developed a model using climate, soil, and topographic variables to improve our ability to predict which acres are likely to be converted to grow crops in the future. We extended the model into Canada so that WWF now has a seamless data layer that covers the entire ecoregion, matching the Plowprint data layer we have developed. Models like this help WWF and partners target their conservation actions, since they provide the ability to predict where threats may occur in the future. We also use the data to identify acres that have been plowed on low-quality soils and would therefore be considered prime candidates for restoration.

Quantifying the Benefits of Ranching for Birds and Water

WWF's ranch bird surveys have found that the 61 participating ranches in Montana, South Dakota, and Nebraska support more than 9,800 birds of 116 species, including 3-6% of the nesting populations of five species whose global populations have declined 65-90% since the 1960s. In addition to supporting birds, ranchlands for beef production maintain habitat for a diversity of wildlife through strategically-managed grazing. Ranchlands also store carbon and provide clean water and healthy soil. Together, these ranches add up to over 600,000 acres that provide valuable ecological services, saving downstream communities tens of millions of dollars. In fact, WWF estimates that these grasslands deliver an average savings per year of 1.6 inches of surface water flow off soils, 0.46 tons/acre of sediment, 1.10 tons/acre of phosphorus, and 9.17 tons/acre of nitrogen.

- Science Staff Update -

The Northern Great Plains team is pleased to welcome Dr. Patrick Lendrum as our new Science Lead. He will be helping conduct applied research to further conservation in this important ecoregion. Patrick comes to WWF with over a decade of research experience largely focused on how best to minimize the effects of human disturbance of wildlife and their habitat. He has worked with a wide range of species, from insects to grizzly bears, across the western US.

Anne Gage previously held this position and was promoted to Director of Conservation Programs.

▲ TRIBAL WORKING GROUP ON SUSTAINABLE FINANCING

GAINING TRACTION: TOURISM ASSESSMENT AND CONSERVATION PLANNING COMPLETED

Since 2015, the Tribal Working Group on Sustainable Financing has been working toward their vision to “ensure the sustainability of tribal wildlife conservation for current and future generations by creating sustainable financing, engaging local communities and leadership, and connecting conservation with culture.” The Working Group consists of representatives from six NGP reservations, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and tribal and conservation NGOs who meet monthly. Following their exchange trip to the Great Bear Rainforest in September 2017, the Working Group was inspired to launch an assessment of sustainable tourism opportunities for tribes in the Northern Great Plains. They hired Solimar International, an international consulting firm on sustainable tourism, which conducted a study tour of six tribal nations within the region in 2018. Solimar’s study identified both challenges and opportunities. Challenges include gaps in accommodations and infrastructure, existing full- or half-day tour packages and established activities, underdeveloped marketing and information for tourism in Indian Country, and lack of involvement by tribal members in tourism activities. However, they also noted significant opportunities for tribes, including existing annual celebrations such as powwows and rodeos, scenic roads and beautiful landscapes, existing visitor information sites, significant natural and cultural assets in the region and within reservation boundaries, use of local champions for tourism development, and tribal members for culturally-sensitive tourism development.

In 2018, the Working Group also finished a pilot conservation and financial plan for the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe in partnership with WWF’s experts in conservation finance. This effort helped the Department of Wildlife,



Habitat biologist, Joel Bich, and wildlife biologist, Shaun Grassel, walk partners through grasslands and food plots that their Department manages on the Lower Brule Reservation. November 2017.

Fish and Recreation set clear five-year goals around species restoration, hunting and fishing revenue, land management, and wildlife management and organization. The process of setting department-wide goals with clear actions and possible funding sources enabled wildlife managers at Lower Brule to aim higher than ever before, resulting in more opportunities for species such as black-footed ferrets. Furthermore, equipped with these plans, Lower Brule has already started to leverage additional funding from new donors.

WWF and the Working Group are also in the process of hiring a full-time initiative coordinator who can carry the work forward. We hope to have this person on board before the end of 2018. At this time, strong leadership is needed to enable the Working Group to take concrete steps toward their ambitious vision.

▲ BLACK-FOOTED FERRETS

FERRETS, FLEAS, AND FIPRONIL

What do ferrets, fleas, and Fipronil have in common? Sylvatic plague. Black-footed ferrets (and their prairie dog prey) are susceptible to this highly lethal non-native disease. Fleas are the vector of plague, and Fipronil is the newest plague deterrent that is successfully suppressing fleas on prairie dogs in South Dakota field trials. To mitigate plague in ferret and prairie dog populations, innovation is the key ingredient. Applying Deltamethrin is the most effective way to reduce flea populations in prairie dog burrows, but it is labor intensive to distribute—and after six or more years of annual application, fleas can develop resistance to it. Therefore, WWF and partners are continuing to pool their creative energies and funding to test additional plague mitigation tools. We are evaluating the large-scale effectiveness of sylvatic plague vaccine baits for prairie dogs at ferret reintroduction sites and assessing the efficacy of Fipronil (the same ingredient in “Frontline,” used to control fleas and ticks in domestic dogs and cats) as a new tool to systemically reduce fleas on prairie dogs. Evolutionary resistance of sylvatic plague in ferrets and prairie dogs may or may not be achieved in the years to come; therefore, several plague-detering tools are needed to maintain populations of both species.



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WWF is grateful to our partners—including SBB Research Group—who support black-footed ferret recovery in the Northern Great Plains.



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FOSTERING CO-EXISTENCE

We must create physical and social space for the presence and persistence of prairie dogs to achieve black-footed ferret recovery. To remove the black-footed ferret from the Endangered Species List, 500,000 acres of prairie dog habitat is required to establish 3,000 ferrets in 30 places. This is less than one-tenth of the 1% of remaining prairie dog habitat in the North America Great Plains. While 500,000 acres is a proverbial drop in the bucket in the grand scheme of recovery goals, the local impact of prairie dogs from a landowner's perspective can be a deluge. Despite the keystone role prairie dogs play in the grassland ecosystem, they eat the same grass that livestock do. In some places and during certain years, prairie dogs and livestock can co-exist; in others, there is insufficient forage for both.

So, how can we foster co-existence between prairie dogs and livestock in enough places to recover ferrets? The answer is through innovation. WWF is researching, fundraising, and co-hosting community dialogues to implement incentives for tribal and private landowners who voluntarily agree to host populations of ferrets and prairie dogs in harmony with their livestock operations. Safe Harbor Agreements and financial incentives have facilitated the establishment of numerous new ferret populations, yet funding is a limiting factor and other options such as tax credits and wildlife-friendly certifications warrant exploration. WWF is also working with communities in South Dakota and Wyoming to collectively brainstorm ways ferret populations can be established in working landscapes.

Recovery of this top predator requires an unwavering commitment to combating sylvatic plague and solutions to creating a landscape in which landowners live and thrive with prairie dogs. It takes time, money, and patience to test and retest innovations, and even more patience and community support to establish and maintain black-footed ferret populations. Thank you for accompanying us on this tenacious journey to recover one of North America's most endangered terrestrial mammals. Your support translates into ensuring that ferrets, landowners, and the grassland ecosystems they both depend on remain part of this nation's natural history for generations to come.



PLAINS BISON

WWF AND TRIBAL PARTNERS LISTEN THEN DELIVER

The goal of WWF's bison initiative is to establish five conservation herds of at least 1,000 bison each within the Northern Great Plains by 2025. As of the fall of 2018, there are 2,548 bison in four herds managed by tribal (Fort Peck and Fort Belknap Reservations), public (Badlands National Park: North Unit), and private partners (American Prairie Reserve). In each case, WWF has made a meaningful contribution. As a result, our bison initiative is on track to achieve this ambitious goal and contribute to the long-term health of the species.

Our work with tribes over the past decade has clearly demonstrated the value of an approach that begins by identifying community values, needs, and aspirations, and then delivers results to ensure meaningful, durable conservation outcomes. Practicing this philosophy, WWF worked with two additional tribal communities to design and run surveys in 2018.

At Fort Belknap, more than 200 tribal members completed surveys, providing important perspectives for the buffalo program manager. One result of note is that 87% of participants agreed that it is important for their community to contribute to restoring bison to the grasslands of North America—this marked an increase from our first survey at Fort Peck. WWF is now working with the Fort Belknap Buffalo Group and their coordinator, Nancy Ironstar-Stiffarm, to summarize the results of the survey. Once completed, the results will be shared via a newsletter and flyer and distributed throughout the community. The survey findings will form a foundation for community engagement and spark a larger discussion to help identify activities, goals, and next steps for the Fort Belknap Buffalo Program.

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At Pine Ridge, Monica Terkildsen, Oglala Lakota tribal member and WWF Program Officer, led the development of a survey to understand the community's values, needs, and aspirations for the South Unit of Badlands National Park. At 133,000 acres, it is the largest piece of contiguous tribal trust land on Pine Ridge Reservation. Monica worked with elected and cultural leaders, college students, economic development staff, and other tribal members to design the survey. She then secured approval from all nine districts on Pine Ridge to conduct the survey. More than 600 tribal members completed surveys thanks to Monica's determined efforts, which included canvassing door-to-door, attending community events, posting the survey online, and running ads on local radio. We secured enough responses from each of the nine districts to provide an informed perspective on the needs and priorities of each one, and to allow for meaningful comparison across districts. The results will serve as a starting point for a community dialogue process. We anticipate that priorities and proposed management actions emerging from this discussion will result in greater benefit to more tribal members and underserved segments of the tribal population.



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▲ SUSTAINABLE RANCHING INITIATIVE

CONSERVATION ROADSHOW HEADS TO EASTERN MONTANA

Ensuring that local decision-makers understand what is happening with respect to conversion in their area is vital to achieving conservation impact. Using results from WWF's Plowprint Report and Soil Suitability Analysis, WWF and partners are visiting over 20 Conservation Districts (CDs), US Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offices, and rancher-led groups in eastern Montana. CDs and NRCS staff make local-level project permitting and funding decisions. NRCS service centers administer funds for projects involving grassland restoration, improved grazing management, and wildlife conservation. Typically, funding for such projects is administered on a first-come, first-served basis involving proposal scores. However, by combining data from the Plowprint Report and data from intact habitat, including soil quality and priority grassland bird areas, and then plotting this information on county maps, NRCS and CD staff can more strategically prioritize projects. We are developing a database that will allow staff and local groups to query statistics useful for decision-making and writing funding proposals. To date, we have met with 82 participants at seven CD meetings. The information has been well-received, is facilitating ongoing dialogue, and increasing the effectiveness of on-the-ground conservation efforts.

USRSB RELEASES SUSTAINABILITY FRAMEWORK

WWF works with diverse stakeholders through efforts such as the US Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (USRSB) to measurably and transparently improve beef's environmental, social, and economic sustainability. In 2018, the USRSB released its sustainability framework, a product of three years of collaboration among a diverse group of stakeholders, including WWF. The framework includes principles for sustainability, indicators and metrics for measuring improvement, and Sustainability Assessment Guides. These are designed to assist sustainability efforts in each step of the supply chain by providing site-level assessment tools, decision support systems, resources, and materials. Pilot projects are underway to test the framework, identify gaps and other resources and tools that will encourage uptake of the framework. In 2019, members of the USRSB will focus on outreach and promote uptake of the Sustainability Framework in order to drive continuous improvement in the beef industry.



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PILOT TO TEST SUSTAINABILITY METRICS

In order to put the US Roundtable for Sustainable Beef's (USRSB) work into action and bring recognition of the importance of grasslands to the beef industry, WWF initiated a sustainable beef pilot project with the Montana Stockgrowers Association, JBS USA (a subsidiary of the world's largest processor of beef and pork), and Costco in late 2017. The pilot will enable producers to showcase their commitment to sustainable beef production while field-testing the indicators, metrics, and sustainability assessment guides of the USRSB. Results and findings will not only improve the work of the USRSB, but also give the work of ranchers and the importance of grasslands a platform within Costco's corporate sustainability reporting. In 2018, WWF recruited NGP ranchers for the pilot and added the Hy-Plains Cattle Feedyard as a new partner—an organization also partnering with the Noble Research Institute on a similar project in the Southern Plains. The NGP pilot project will launch in the spring of 2019.



THANK YOU

We truly appreciate all that you do to advance WWF's conservation initiatives in the Northern Great Plains. We are grateful for your passion and dedication to protecting the future of these grassland ecosystems and the communities who depend on them.

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Special thanks to the Toyota Motor Corporation for supporting the WWF Northern Great Plains Program through their generous donation of a 2018 Highlander Hybrid fieldwork vehicle.