



Saving Our Grasslands

Why They Matter, Why We Are Losing Them,
and How We Can Save Them

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2023

North America is home to some of the last remaining intact temperate grassland ecosystems, ecosystems that are [imperiled globally](#). Grasslands are critical for biodiversity and nature; hold approximately [one-third of global terrestrial carbon stocks](#); and provide critical resilience in the face of climate change, including drought, heat, and wildfire. They are also essential to the livelihoods and food security of communities around the world—and a source of goods and services such as wild food, energy, and wildlife habitat.

Grasslands are some of the most threatened and yet least protected ecosystems in the world, with only a few large, intact tracts remaining. More than 70 percent of America's prairies have been destroyed. WWF's recent [Plowprint Report](#) documented a loss of 1.8 million acres of grassland habitat in the Great Plains in 2020 and 10 million acres between 2016 and 2020—acres plowed primarily for row crop agriculture. This large-scale habitat loss is a major contributor to the precipitous decline of [grassland birds](#) and the loss of vast amounts of sequestered carbon.

Although created with good intentions, some policies have inadvertently incentivized the conversion of grasslands. Two key examples are federal subsidies for crop insurance, provided to encourage farmers to get crop insurance so they will be better protected against financial losses, and the [Renewable Fuel Standard \(RFS\)](#), created to move the United States toward greater energy independence and to increase the production of renewable fuels. Crop insurance subsidies remove the risks associated with farming marginal lands such as converted grasslands, [incentivizing crop expansion on those lands](#). In the case of the RFS, increased demand for biofuels crops (such as corn and soybeans) combined with the lack of effective implementation of the original law's provisions to prevent biofuels-driven conversion resulted in the program causing [significant conversion of grasslands to cropland](#).

WHAT POLICIES CAN TURN THE TIDE ON GRASSLAND CONVERSION?

1 Amend the Renewable Fuel Standard

Given the impacts of the RFS on land use conversion to date, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) should require validation that lands were in cultivation prior to 2007 to qualify for the program. Furthermore, EPA should adjust renewable volume obligations downward, to reflect the amount that can be produced from lands in compliance with the no-conversion requirement. Finally, to drive further sustainability improvements, EPA should follow the lead of the US-supported sustainability requirements under the United Nations' International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), which requires third-party certification of alternative aviation fuel against a set of sustainability safeguards designed to prevent land use conversion, water and soil degradation, and other relevant risks.

2 Address crop insurance subsidies

To better protect native grasslands, the US Congress should strengthen Sodsaver (a provision created to address the impacts of crop insurance in driving grassland and other habitat conversion) by making newly cultivated intact grassland acreage ineligible for any crop insurance premium subsidies for 10 years, and by expanding Sodsaver's intact grassland protections nationwide. In addition, Congress should invest more in tracking conversion and should direct the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) to report intact grassland conversion data to Congress and the public annually, to enable analysis of the effects of Sodsaver and other policies on intact grassland and identification of what further action may be needed.

3 Advance key opportunities in the 2023 Farm Bill conservation programs

Congress should strengthen and expand the Grassland Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) to optimize outcomes for grasslands, ranchers, the climate, and biodiversity by providing an option for longer contracts with managed grazing requirements, targeting core and vulnerable areas, and boosting support for grazing under CRP in general and Grassland CRP in particular. Furthermore, Congress should scale regenerative and resilient practices and systems by expanding funding under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) for priority species; directing the 50 percent of EQIP funding set aside for livestock operations to prioritize sustainable grazing; and improving technical assistance to farmers and ranchers by increasing staff and use of Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge. Finally, Congress should enhance equity and inclusion by ensuring USDA consults with, empowers, and improves program access for communities, such as Native nations, that have faced historical and systematic marginalization and discrimination. Native nations play a critical role in grassland conservation and management, so ensuring equitable access to USDA programs will enhance outcomes for grasslands.

4 Protect and build upon Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funding for grasslands, conservation, and climate-smart agriculture

Congress should protect the \$20 billion investment in agricultural conservation and climate smart agriculture included in the Inflation Reduction Act. The National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) should leverage the unprecedented opportunity of IRA resources to launch a new, strategic initiative to protect, restore, and improve management of grasslands in the Central Grasslands, building upon the extensive work of the [Central Grasslands Roadmap](#) and its [Assessment Map](#).

5 Reduce food loss and waste

The US produces and imports an abundance of food each year, but approximately 35 percent of it [goes unsold or uneaten](#). Reducing loss and waste represents a great opportunity to mitigate pressures to convert grasslands by reducing how much food needs to be produced overall.

6 Pass the North American Grasslands Conservation Act

Modeled after the hugely successful North American Wetlands Conservation Act, the [Grasslands Conservation Act](#) establishes a North American Grasslands Conservation Strategy; creates a flexible, voluntary, incentive-based grant program; creates national and regional Grasslands Conservation Councils; and establishes research initiatives on native seed crop systems and regenerative grazing practices.

WHY IS THE GRASSLANDS CONVERSION ISSUE SO URGENT?

The time to act is now, with an urgency driven both by the need to curb grassland conversion trends and by the looming impacts of climate change that could exacerbate those challenges in the future. And the benefits of action are significant. Protecting and restoring America's grasslands not only boosts habitat but also advances nature-based solutions to sequester carbon in the soil, reducing the impacts of climate change and improving landscape resilience while supporting Native nations, ranchers, farmers, sportsmen and -women, and rural communities. We must act now to maintain grassland systems for agriculture, wildlife habitat, and carbon sequestration—for today and for future generations.

Please see our full report at [this link](#).

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together possible

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