

NORTH AMERICAN GRASSLANDS CONSERVATION ACT

CONSERVATION POLICY COLUMN

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Pheasants Forever/Quail Forever (PF/QF), and the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) have been long-time partners with the Boone and Crockett Club. As active partners in the American Wildlife Conservation Partnership (AWCP), we are pleased to use this edition of *Fair Chase* to describe a new development.

During the preparation of the latest AWCP agenda, *Wildlife for the 21st Century: Volume VI (W21)*, we and the other partners had the idea that the nation's grasslands have been left out of America's grand strategy for conservation. Unlike wetlands, farmlands, and the many types of habitat found on private land, grasslands do not have a specific program for their conservation.

Grassland conservation to date has benefited primarily—and substantially—from the generational stewardship of farmers, ranchers, tribal nations,

hunters, outdoor recreationists, and sportsmen-conservationists. Agencies have collaborated on these efforts, and they have some programs that directly apply to grassland conservation, but not comprehensively.

In W21, our partnership proposed to: “Enact a comprehensive National Grasslands Initiative modeled on the successful North American Wetlands Conservation Act to achieve a goal of ‘net gain’ of grasslands and prairie habitats.” We noted that this will require an act of Congress that involves the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Farm Services Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Acting on that proposal, PF/QF and NWF have led the way toward drafting a bill and seeking congressional sponsors. We have been assisted by many conservation partner organizations in the process. Our vision is for a North American Grasslands

Conservation Act that would create a landowner-driven, voluntary, incentive-based program to conserve and restore threatened grassland ecosystems.

There is an urgency to act now to maintain grassland and sagebrush shrub-steppe systems for agriculture, wildlife habitat, carbon sequestration, and for future generations. Grasslands and sagebrush shrub-steppe systems continue to be the most threatened ecosystems in the world.

These ecosystems, which comprise tallgrass, mixed grass, and shortgrass prairies, sagebrush shrub-steppe, and savannah grasslands (hereafter, “grassland ecosystems”), are in many cases working lands that are critical for rural economies, carbon sequestration, and wildlife habitat.

Over the last decade alone, millions of acres of grasslands in North America have been converted to cropland and lost to residential and commercial development.

Grasslands are further threatened by fragmentation, invasive species, and degradation. Additionally, on average, about 1.2 million acres of sagebrush burn each year due to invasive annual grasses that fuel catastrophic wildfire. At the same time, there has been a decrease in numbers of working farms and ranches due to pressures to convert or sell land, and challenges in keeping ranching profitable. As we have lost more and more of our nation's grasslands, we have lost more and more of our grassland wildlife, particularly grassland and sagebrush birds.

We need to act quickly and take bold action to conserve and restore North America's native grasslands and sagebrush shrub-steppe while supporting ranchers, farmers, tribal nations, sportsmen and women, and rural communities. An investment in North America's grassland and sagebrush shrub-steppe ecosystems will drive voluntary, science-based efforts to conserve these ecosystems while

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For more information, please reach out to Aviva Glaser at National Wildlife Federation (GlaserA@nwf.org) and Bethany Erb at Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever (BErb@pheasantsforever.org). Visit www.actforgrasslands.org for updates and legislative progress.



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One of the goals of the North American Grasslands Conservation Act is to provide increased recreational and hunter access opportunities, strictly at the discretion of private landowners.

supporting working lands conservation in sequestering carbon, preventing further loss of grassland and sagebrush wildlife, and reducing the risk of species becoming threatened or endangered.

A new North American Grasslands Conservation Act, modeled after the popular and effective North American Wetlands Conservation Act, would help to kickstart the voluntary protection and restoration of North America's grasslands and the livelihoods and wildlife that depend on them. At the time of drafting, the Senate is considering legislative language. We anticipate a bipartisan bill introduction in early 2022.

THE GOALS OF THE BILL ARE:

- 1) Prevent additional conversion of native grasslands and loss of sagebrush shrub-steppe and to sustain these systems as working lands by creating a flexible, voluntary, and innovative program;
- 2) improve grassland and rangeland health and management;
- 3) support rancher stewards and tribal partners;
- 4) improve biodiversity and habitat for grassland and sagebrush birds, pollinators, and other wildlife;
- 5) increase carbon sequestration; and
- 6) provide increased recreational and hunter access opportunities, strictly at the discretion of private landowners.

THE BILL WOULD ACHIEVE THIS BY:

- 1) Authorizing \$350 million annually, largely to fund on-the-ground projects. This includes additional funding for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff, Partners for Fish and Wildlife, and Joint Ventures to administer the program.
- 2) Commissioning the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in consultation with USDA and other relevant agencies, to administer the program.
- 3) Promoting interagency coordination on grasslands by creating an interagency working group, building on the recently released NRCS Working Lands for Wildlife Frameworks for Conservation Action (Great Plains Grasslands and Sagebrush Biome).
- 4) Encouraging the government to work cooperatively on grassland conservation with Canada and Mexico.

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This effort is a great example of how AWCP works. As we continue to improve upon the American conservation strategy in the country, we also seek out the gaps in the effort. The task is bigger than all of us, which is why the AWCP partnership exists. We look forward to continued teamwork with the Boone and Crockett Club. ■