

Stewardship with Vision



FEDERAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Western Landowners Alliance (WLA) is a non-partisan, landowner-led organization that advances policies and practices to sustain working lands, connected landscapes and native species. As landowners and land managers, we recognize that well-managed lands are the cornerstones of both human communities and the ecosystems on which we all depend. We have a deep, vested stake in these lands and the lived experience of what it means to own and manage land, produce food and fiber, and to steward wildlife and natural resources on a daily basis. We created the Western Landowners Alliance to ensure that public policies are informed by people with first-hand knowledge of land stewardship and who share a land ethic and a commitment to conserving our natural heritage for future generations.

There are two very different stories being told right now in the rural West and both are true.

One is about the challenges landowners and agricultural producers face – changing land use, reduced economic viability, catastrophic wildfire, invasive species, a changing climate and drought – that threaten the ability of these lands to remain intact and profitable while providing environmental benefits.

Another is about success as landowners and producers, individually and in collaboration with partners, are regenerating soil health, conserving and restoring wildlife habitat, improving watershed function, producing healthy food, and providing solutions to climate change.

We are at a pivotal point in deciding how we move conservation policies, the economy and our food systems forward. The right mix of pro-active investments and policies to support land stewardship and conservation can ensure the scales tip towards a more sustainable future. These investments are a more cost-effective alternative to expensive recovery and restoration efforts and will return money to the taxpayer. Engaging landowners early and meaningfully when developing land and natural resource policies and plans is essential to creating practical, well-supported and enduring solutions.

As the United States of America moves forward and looks to improve its commitment to conservation, Western Landowners Alliance offers the following recommendations for:

- Conserving and recovering wildlife and biodiversity
- Economic recovery for working lands, improved food systems and equity for rural communities
- Sustaining and improving soil, forest and rangeland health
- Adapting to climate change and building climate resiliency
- Building federal capacity to support collaboration

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RECOMMENDATIONS

CONSERVING AND RECOVERING WILDLIFE AND BIODIVERSITY

Restore biodiversity by leveraging the support and investment of landowners for voluntary conservation and recovery of wildlife species through the following:

- Create regulatory certainty for voluntary conservation through improved access to regulatory assurance agreements;
- Provide dedicated funding for third-party entities to develop and monitor conservation agreements;
- Increase dedicated capacity within the USFWS and state wildlife agencies to initiate and support proactive, voluntary conservation efforts.

ECONOMIC RECOVERY FOR WORKING LANDS, IMPROVED FOOD SYSTEMS AND EQUITY FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES

Create economic drivers that support clean water, wildlife habitat, biodiversity, healthy soils and other public benefits that working lands provide to the public.

Recognize the diversity of land stewards, increase access to technical and financial assistance for underrepresented or marginalized agricultural producers, and invest in women's leadership in agriculture.

SUSTAINING AND IMPROVING SOIL, FOREST AND RANGELAND HEALTH

Fully fund federal Farm Bill working lands programs and ensure that eligibility, practices and payments provide fair and meaningful opportunities for participation by producers in the West.

Create resource coordinator positions to assist producers in accessing programs across multiple agencies.

Provide flexibility for livestock producers to manage for stewardship and operational efficiencies on public grazing allotments.

Support community-based organizations and strengthen markets for sustainably produced forest and range products to restore watershed health, reduce wildfire risk and increase climate resilience.

ADAPTING TO CLIMATE CHANGE AND BUILDING CLIMATE RESILIENCY

Avoid conversion of native grasslands and other existing carbon sinks in the West through conservation easements and payments for ecosystem services, and fund science to identify additional strategies to increase soil health, sequester carbon, improve water retention and increase biodiversity.

BUILDING FEDERAL CAPACITY TO SUPPORT COLLABORATION

Reform agency culture and improve institutional frameworks, funding and staffing to promote interagency cooperation, communication coordination and cost efficiency.

Strengthen community-based collaborative conservation by investing in the human capacity within federal agencies and rural communities needed to bring multiple stakeholders together, leverage resources and deliver technical assistance.



OBJECTIVES

GROWING RURAL COMMUNITIES/ ECONOMIES AND KEEPING LARGE LANDSCAPES INTACT

Many people in the regulated community perceive conservation as a negative objective that reduces economic opportunity. Likewise, many members of the public perceive economic development as an inherent threat to conservation. Framing conservation and economic opportunity as opposing objectives is unnecessary. With the right policies, conservation and agricultural production work very well together and often go hand-in-hand. Working lands are central to mitigating climate change and restoring biodiversity, but this can come at a personal cost to the landowner. These lands also supply the public with food, fiber and recreation. Providing these services should be a way for rural communities to thrive and flourish. We need economic drivers, not just regulation, that support and sustain the stewardship of these resources for public benefit. The administration can lay the foundation for rural economies and conservation to succeed in these ways:

- Support strong and competitive markets for food, fiber and agricultural products.
- Improve management practices that will benefit people and wildlife by including compensation, conflict prevention and control measures in wildlife and large predator policies.
- Develop a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) restoration policy to establish a consistent approach to restoring BLM administered lands and promote flexible and outcome-based grazing strategies.
- Increase staff in USDA regional offices and create resource coordinator positions in Western states who will work across agencies and provide on the ground support and technical assistance to landowners, farmers and ranchers.
- Include opportunities for private lands, landowners, farmers, ranchers, producers and struggling rural communities as a revitalized Civilian Conservation Corps program moves forward.

Prioritize research on agricultural practices such as advanced grazing management, diversified cropping systems, livestock-crop integration and forestry, as well as disease issues like brucellosis. Work with WLA members who are already engaged in these successful management practices and showcase what is working on the ground.

REDEFINING WHAT IT MEANS TO BE “ON THE MAP”

Whether it is through an ESA critical habitat designation, a wildlife migration corridor designation, or identification as a private land inholding, landowners rarely perceive being designated “on the map” as positive or productive. Being on the map is usually associated with land use restrictions, increased public scrutiny of management practices or implications to property value. Creating a positive connection to conservation designations and species presence is one of the biggest steps that an administration could take toward addressing issues like climate change or biodiversity loss. This starts by recognizing and supporting landowners already providing essential habitat and ecosystem services with the following actions.

- Increase Farm Bill eligibility/ranking for conservation programs for those enrolled in regulatory assurance programs like CCAAs or SHAs.
- Pair economic support with critical habitat and other special conservation designations on private land to reward private land stewardship and maintenance of quality habitat.
- Change the approach federal agencies take when conserving wildlife habitat and designating wildlife corridors by including landowners in the process upfront, as decision makers, not as an afterthought.
- Work with landowners to establish a baseline valuation of habitat and develop habitat-leasing structure to acknowledge and support those who voluntarily provide and manage for wildlife habitat, open space, food and fiber and other services.
- Invest in programs such as Working Lands for Wildlife within the Natural Resources Conservation Service to provide incentives, including regulatory certainty and risk minimization, for landowners engaged in voluntary conservation efforts on their lands to maintain and restore wildlife habitat.

