



**Farm Production and Conservation**

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**THE IMPORTANCE OF PRIVATE, WORKING LANDS TO YELLOWSTONE  
IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

A keynote address for the University of Wyoming’s 150th Anniversary of Yellowstone Symposium, held at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming

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Yellowstone National Park has been at the center of the story of American conservation for more than 150 years. When the Park was established, there was an emerging, but still tenuous, national consensus that places like Yellowstone should be protected. Over the coming decades, that consensus would be forged by Roosevelt, Pinchot, Muir and many others. As we celebrate the 150th Anniversary of the establishment of Yellowstone, we should take stock of where conservation in America has been, what it has accomplished, and, importantly, where it needs to go next.

The arc of Yellowstone’s history up to the present tracks the arc of conservation’s history in America. We heard during yesterday’s first panel about the long history of tribal stewardship of what would become Yellowstone and we heard about the painful dispossession of these lands. And we heard of the familial relationship of the tribes to Yellowstone’s wildlife.

In signing the Yellowstone National Park Protection Act in 1872, President Grant set aside about 2 million acres as our nation's first national park. But, almost immediately, it was clear the park was too small to protect its wildlife – by 1886 one of the first managers of the park, Army General Philip Sheridan, was asking Congress to make it bigger. That didn’t happen, but his vision partly manifested over the next century. New national forests were established - including the country’s first, the Shoshone – as well as wilderness designations and state wildlife reserves that combined to protect millions more acres. State and tribal hunting and fishing regulations and endangered-species protections helped wildlife recover from overharvest and persecution.

In the subsequent years, public values broadened, and Americans wanted a wilder, more pristine Park. The fields of ecology and conservation biology came into their own in the late Twentieth Century. These fields gave us a new view of parks, including Yellowstone and Grand Teton, as isolated “islands” that would lose species over time unless they were effectively enlarged. New science told us that species like the grizzly bear needed huge ranges to persist. These insights all manifested in the 1980s as the new concept of a “Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.” The GYE

concept implies that the integrity of the core protected areas depends on a much larger landscape – and that even 2 million acres of parks and 15 million acres of national forests are not enough. It crystallizes the idea that to truly benefit these iconic species, we must work together across boundaries – public and private and tribal.

While there is broad recognition that the challenge of conserving the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem requires actions far beyond the Park’s boundaries, for much of the Twentieth Century, conservation efforts were dominated by attempts to put more lands into the public domain and increase protections on existing public lands. This 20th Century model of conservation accomplished an enormous amount of good. It’s why if you drove here from Bozeman or Jackson, through the parks, you might have seen a grizzly bear or a wolf. In many ways it’s why we are here today celebrating this place, and why we are able to keep debating its future.

But as we look at this landscape and many others, the 20th Century Model of conservation has significant limitations. Over-reliance on land acquisition, on public land designations, and on regulation of non-federal lands is incapable of successfully meeting the challenges we face today. In order to conserve functional ecosystems across boundaries, we have to work with, not against, states, tribes, and private landowners – with, not against, agriculture and forestry. A model which casts the federal government as dictator and solely as a regulator won’t work.

We’ve long recognized the importance of working with people to conserve land in a voluntary and incentive-based manner. Over the last several decades, we have developed new tools to protect working lands from development, and help manage them in ways that benefit wildlife, clean water and the climate – all while ensuring we continue to produce food, fiber and fuel. Some of the most pathbreaking work has been done right here in the GYE, by many of you present here today. But the truth is, we’ve struggled to build the policy, financial, and human infrastructure necessary to deliver conservation at meaningful scales.

Wildlife migration – particularly in this place – provides us the opportunity to take the tools we have developed and forge a more collaborative approach to conservation in this Century that will move away from the polarization which has far too often characterized our efforts, and instead forge alliances among landowners, tribes, agriculture, forestry and local communities that will accelerate our efforts.

The ungulate (a.k.a., big game) migrations of the West demonstrate the old model’s limitations very clearly. Native American tribes long knew of them. They knew this ecosystem was migratory, fluid, dynamic; many tribes followed the migrations seasonally. More recently, a lot of state and local biologists, outfitters and guides, and ranchers and farmers also came to know something about the migrations. But in the past two decades, the advent of satellite-based GPS tracking changed the game by allowing mapping of migrations in unprecedented breadth and detail, all before the eyes of an interested public.

We now know more than ever before about the path of several hundred pronghorn that travel between the Green River Basin and Grand Teton National Park, or the 150-mile journey made by thousands of mule deer in nearby areas of Wyoming. We can see how 6 species – elk, mule deer, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, moose and bison – migrate twice each year anywhere from 30 to 200

miles across western landscapes, including this one. Some of these migrations rival the longest known on the African continent.

My friend and colleague Arthur Middleton says when he first began mapping out the elk migrations around here, he felt he was seeing the veins and arteries of the ecosystem. These migrations made by tens of thousands of animals allow animals to take advantage of the annual green-up – to ride “the green wave” – and thereby strengthen the health of the herd. Healthy herds, in turn, sustain other species like grizzlies, wolves, eagles, ravens and foxes. The spectacle of these wildlife draw tourists and hunters and defines a way of life in places like Cody, Livingston, West Yellowstone and Jackson.

But here’s the thing. If you follow those migration routes across the map, you quickly end up outside the parks. Outside the wilderness. Beyond multiple-use federal lands and tribal lands. And you end up on vast areas of private land – many of which have been owned and stewarded by families for generations as productive agricultural lands. Private lands comprise about 30%, or 6 million acres, of this Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. And it’s some of the most important land to biodiversity and wildlife because when the United States promoted settlement through land privatization, settlers chose the most productive land. Wildlife use those highly productive lands for the same reasons we do.

While not always obvious, if the public wants to continue to see Yellowstone’s and Grand Teton’s key wildlife in abundance, they should be very concerned about the fate of private, working lands outside the Parks. Partnering with landowners to conserve habitats dozens or even a hundred miles from the stone gates at Gardiner or West Yellowstone may have as much bearing on those magnificent animals as what happens inside either of the Parks.

But, how?

Most of us involved in conserving landscapes like this one understand the limitations of regulation on working lands.

Land use regulation at the local level can play an important role in addressing immediate threats such as development. Federal regulations, however, on private lands have severe limitations. Such regulations have little utility in stopping the conversion of open space to ranchettes, or in helping ranchers to install wildlife friendly fencing, or in encouraging restoration of habitat on lands dominated by cheatgrass. In short, regulations can stop bad things, but they’re often not very good and are sometimes even counter-productive in encouraging land stewardship.

In rural America, folks tend to be fairly skeptical of regulatory approaches to conservation. When I was at Duke University, I studied rural attitudes on the environment and conservation. I polled, held focus groups, and even met with rural voters across the country. It turns out that rural folks care just as much about the environment as folks in cities and suburban areas. Where attitudes differ is in relation to environmental policy. In short, everyone in America agrees that we should conserve the environment – rural folks care a lot about how it’s done.

Top-down, regulatory approaches are often not very effective, and they are often divisive. This is a problem since, in order to conserve places like the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, we need the

active participation of the people who own and manage working lands. What's more, it turns out a lot of ranchers and farmers actually know a few things about land stewardship, and they want to be at the table to develop solutions.

This bottom-up approach is also necessary because every ranch or farm or tract of forest land is different, and the challenges faced by those landowners are different. In the GYE, there are ranches that winter a few hundred migratory mule deer; and then there are those that winter 4 migratory big game species, including 2,000 elk. Some landowners have concerns about elk and brucellosis, or the predation from wolves or grizzly bears, or damage to fences and forage from wintering animals. And the owners differ, too, in the size of the operation, the importance of agricultural income, and in other ways. Within miles of where we sit today, 20 landowners together own more than 50% of the Cody elk herd's winter range. We need to approach them with some humility, learn about their views and their needs, and design incentives and approaches that work for them.

When I began working in conservation nearly 30 years ago, the first project I worked on involved conserving an endangered woodpecker on private, working forests in the South. The bird requires mature pines managed with frequent, prescribed fire. While regulation could help protect the old trees, without active management in the form of prescribed fire, the birds were doomed. Yet, in the wake of the spotted owl wars that were still playing out in the Pacific Northwest at the time, forest landowners in the South were concerned that managing their forests for woodpecker habitat would only invite new regulation under the Endangered Species Act.

Today, hundreds of thousands of acres of private lands in the South are being managed for the benefit of that bird. What overcame landowner opposition? A combination of incentives that reward habitat conservation; regulatory assurances that help reduce landowner concerns; and perhaps most importantly, an approach which makes landowners vital partners and gives them a voice in deciding whether and how to manage their lands for the benefit of the ecosystem.

In short, in the case of the woodpecker and in many other species, conservation is succeeding where conservation is being done with private landowners, not to them. Conservation, it turns out, is a team game.

Of course, even as we develop and expand this collaborative model of conservation, climate change poses new questions. As habitat and species assemblages inevitably shift, we need strategies that allow us to work across larger, shifting landscapes.

Parks and wilderness will always be critical, but scientists increasingly view this approach as too narrow and rigid on its own, particularly when facing a rapidly changing climate.

The science on how ecosystems respond to climate change shows that they will move, shrink and grow. So, a new model of conservation must be flexible, adaptive and dynamic. This means being able to shift conservation efforts over time and across changing landscapes. It means increasing flexibility to actively manage to prevent catastrophic wildfire and to address drought across large landscapes. And, it means adding additional conservation options to the private land conservation toolbox.

While tried and true tools like perpetual conservation easements and payments for specific restoration actions will remain important, we also need to develop new tools, like habitat leases, that give landowners some certainty over a decade or more, while allowing conservation priorities to shift geographically.

Climate change requires us also to design conservation strategies at larger scales. If we can partner with folks already on the land, and share costs with them, then we may be able to work over larger areas more quickly.

In recent years, the pages of top journals like Science and Nature have been covered with research showing that well-managed working lands can produce more biodiversity than parks. But unfortunately, the science also shows that globally, parks attract development and fragmentation, because people want to come use and enjoy their resources. So, around parks, counterintuitively, we may have to do even more to support working lands conservation. Folks from here in Cody see this after just a short few years, watching remote workers and COVID refugees flood into their community, looking for a nice place to live, close to the mountains – sometimes in the middle of critical wildlife habitat.

The good news is that ecology is showing us that many wildlife species and ecosystems have unexpected resiliency. There is a capacity for behavioral flexibility, a capacity to recover and restore. In Wyoming, studies show that migratory elk and deer can tolerate some development, and some noise and some traffic, so we if we can limit ourselves below certain thresholds, they will keep using important habitats. This kind of work gives us confidence we can integrate conservation and working landscapes.

Meanwhile, the social and policy sciences are showing again and again that people broadly support conservation but place their greatest trust in solutions forged closer to home. Here in Wyoming, the love for wildlife and habitat - including these migratory herds – is clear but it's also clear folks want to be heard and want to see their own universities and state and local agencies at the table. And fortunately for Wyoming, you all are blessed with a lot of talent and leadership in your state and local institutions.

Admittedly, this more collaborative, more local brand of conservation isn't easy. It's hard. It requires far more investment in relationships – upfront and ongoing. And these relationships may be with people who think differently, and who challenge our assumptions, and even our goals. But this isn't a new revelation. Aldo Leopold, for many the father of wildlife conservation in America, said, "There are two things that interest me: the relation of people to each other, and the relation of people to land."

This approach also requires resources. Conservation isn't free. It involves real costs for land conservation, restoration, management, and monitoring. We heard yesterday from Bob Budd, director of the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resources Trust, about the need for investments that provide landowners value for their conservation commitments. He's right.

The new model is also information-hungry: it requires that we integrate natural and social sciences and also local knowledge and traditional ecological knowledge to help us design solutions that balance interests and fit local contexts.

With the investments in land stewardship, relationships, and information, this new model will be far more durable. The pendulum swings that we see in our electoral politics these days often mean that hard-fought battles may be temporary, or that those battles may persist for decades. Maybe, instead of waging war, we ought to build a broad middle that will support conservation no matter who's in office.

The work in Wyoming so far has these traits. There are scientists who've listened to ranchers and tribes. Photographers who have brought communities into the story. Local groups volunteering time on weekends to take down fences. Governor Gordon has worked with a range of communities and stakeholders in his state to establish a productive process and point the way forward.

We at USDA have seen this and we've been inspired by it. And today we are making a commitment.

Over the coming months and years, we will work with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust, and their local partners to use our diverse programs and authorities to help conserve working lands that provide migratory big game habitats in priority areas identified with the state. As we have consulted the partners, we have heard of needs in three key areas: 1) agricultural land conservation; 2) land restoration and management; and 3) long-term stewardship.

To help conserve agricultural land, we're going to start by providing additional, dedicated resources to Wyoming through our Agricultural Conservation Easement Program; and will be prioritizing work around wildlife migration in our Regional Conservation Partnership Program nationally. Additionally, we'll be working with local land trusts to make sure folks in key geographies know about these opportunities. These actions can help ensure intact ranches, farms and working forests stay that way. One of our most important conservation goals is to keep working lands working.

To help partners restore and manage habitat, we will be providing additional, dedicated resources from our Environmental Quality Incentives Program and we'll use authorities provided by the Farm Bill to speed up the process to allocate those resources to agricultural producers and landowners. We'll also be teaming with local partners to help streamline the process and scale up delivery. These resources will help ranchers and farmers implement a variety of conservation practices such as invasive species treatments, meadow restoration and wildlife friendly fencing.

We also want to help develop a new tool: habitat leasing. To meet partners' desire for long-term management that they can plan their businesses around, we will offer a habitat leasing opportunity built on our Grasslands Conservation Reserve Program. This working-lands version of the popular CRP program provides an annual payment to landowners in exchange for maintaining suitable wildlife habitat and preventing conversion to non-compatible uses for a term of 10-15 years. This is a working lands programs, so ranchers can keep sustainably grazing those lands. This is a really

powerful tool. To date, there are over 170,000 acres in Wyoming enrolled in the grasslands CRP program, and USDA will be paying those landowners over \$32 million in payments over the life of the 10- to 15-year contracts.

But, in designing this new habitat leasing program using Grasslands CRP, we want to provide additional priority, flexibility, and financial firepower to conserve migration corridors and important big game habitat. In the next few weeks, we'll announce additional acres enrolled in this year's signup. As part of this effort, we have already piloted policy changes in 6 GYE counties within Wyoming that will prioritize these lands for enrollment. We are also going to providing a new ability add additional funds to conservation leasing by allowing landowner to "stack" our EQIP funding and Grasslands CRP programs on the same acres. This means we can make up-front investments in restoration and habitat friendly fencing through EQIP, and then pay landowners annually to maintain improved conditions for the full 10- to 15-year duration.

As we introduce habitat leasing, we recognize that we it may take some time to work the kinks out. As we move toward next year's signup, we'll work hard with the state and local partners on other ways to make the programs work better.

Delivering these programs will require two USDA agencies – Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Farm Service Agency – to work together in new ways. I want to thank all the USDA staff here today for all they have done, and will do, to ensure we are successful. Implementing these programs in a targeted and integrated manner will also require new agency capacity. So, we are also announcing today the creation of a new, dedicated position in Natural Resource Conservation Service here in Wyoming to serve as Point of Contact and help us coordinate with the state, across the federal family, and with local groups. Importantly, this big-game migration coordinator will help us build out the technical capacity we will need to succeed. To be clear, we're smart enough at USDA to know we don't have all the answers and will need all of you and many others to help shape our collective efforts so that they succeed.

Implementation will also require the ideas, creativity, relationships and capacity of this region's land trust, NGO, and agricultural community. We will work with them to identify their needs and jointly identify ways they can best partner with USDA on implementation. We commit to working with philanthropic foundations to help them understand how supporting support private capacity can maximize our collective impacts.

And we need the NGO community to keep bringing new ideas. Our friends at Greater Yellowstone Coalition, The Nature Conservancy of Wyoming, and Western Landowners Alliance are piloting variations on habitat leasing that can inform future policy and management. Our friends at the Property and Environment Research Center are standing up a really innovative Brucellosis Compensation Fund in the Paradise Valley so that ranchers who protect elk habitat aren't shooting themselves in the foot. We pledge to look for ways to champion this creativity and experimentation and coordinate to ensure we can leverage off one another's strengths.

We will also continue developing key partnerships at the leadership level. We are working closely with our colleagues in the US Forest Service and over in the Department of Interior to expand on this work going forward.

I talked about the history and importance of the tribes in my opening. As we heard from the panel yesterday morning and from YNP superintendent Cam Sholly last night, there is far more we can and must do with tribal nations to support all of our interests in Yellowstone and the GYE. Just a couple days ago, USDA's Office of Tribal Relations facilitated our first-ever joint visit by USDA and DOI leadership to the Wind River Indian Reservation, where we met the tribal councils to listen and learn about the eastern Shoshone and northern Arapaho peoples' stewardship activities and plans. Speaking for USDA, I was humbled and honored to be able to spend a day learning about the history, stewardship, and restoration plans for the Wind River Reservation.

As with all tribes, the eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapahoe tribal members with whom we met, belong to two sovereign nations – and there are many other tribes that have strong connections to the GYE. While I hope that many of the principles and approaches of this new, more collaborative model of conservation I've discussed here will work for the tribes in this region, it is ultimately up to them as to how they might work with USDA and other federal agencies. What I will say is this: USDA is eager to continue our partnership with you whether through conservation programs, agricultural programs, shared interests on the National Forests, or opportunities to invest in rural economic development. We will continue a conversation with the leaders we met with Tuesday to see how we can collaborate and support their priorities.

Finally, in developing this work in Wyoming, we are committing today to examining how we can expand on this pilot West-wide, so that we can work with other states and their local partners who are working to conserve this important wildlife and the working lands on which they depend.

I first came to Yellowstone National Park when I was seven years old. We traveled from Kentucky first by plane to Chicago and then by train to Billings. We spent a week in the Absarokas on a pack trip and then spent two days in the Park. We left the Park by the east entrance and drive to Cody to this very museum so that we could see the bronzes and other works of art.

I remember as we drove to Cody evening a feeling of sadness in leaving Yellowstone behind. What I didn't understand then, but what I understand now, is that Cody and all that surrounds us here is still very much connected to the Park.

Yellowstone remains an incredibly important place for conservation. But at this 150th anniversary, isn't it time to write its next chapter? We believe that building on what we love about this place – even just keeping hold of what we love about this place – requires fully embracing a new model of conservation that is more locally driven, more collaborative, and that seeks to reward stewardship whenever possible. We at USDA are all in. We want to work with all of you to stand up this approach in Wyoming and hopefully beyond. But we also feel we have to act now – not tomorrow, not next year. And we know we need a lot of people in this room, and others who aren't here today, to join us. Because it's Yellowstone, we'll have a lot of people watching us. But also, because it's Yellowstone, if - or rather when - we succeed, we will be sending a message to the nation and the world about how conservation looks in the 21st Century.