



Stewardship with Vision

# WESTERN LANDOWNERS ALLIANCE

## A FARM BILL THAT WORKS FOR THE WEST

### WLA'S 2023 FARM BILL PLATFORM

**T**here are many threats facing working lands in the West today, from drought and fire to economic challenges to increasingly intense development pressure. With every acre of land lost, we lose another piece of our shared future. Yet there are also many success stories of landowners restoring forests and watersheds, innovating grazing management to better align economic and land health outcomes, helping to conserve and recover wildlife species, working with neighbors to develop water sharing agreements, and much more. Many of these stories begin at the grass-roots or community level, but have impacts far beyond.

As landowners and land managers, we recognize that well-managed working 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 are at a pivotal point in deciding how we move conservation policies, water management strategies, the economy and our food systems forward. The right mix of pro-active investments and policies can ensure that the scales tip toward a more sustainable future for both agriculture and conservation. It is critical that the 2023 Farm Bill convey meaningful economic and technical support for ongoing land stewardship, address barriers to enrollment and accessibility, boost collaborative capacity for community-based conservation, and foster holistic, ecosystem-level conservation approaches, beyond just those that would achieve climate objectives alone.

# INCREASE SUPPORT FOR ONGOING STEWARDSHIP

- Preserve 2018 updates to the Grassland Conservation Reserve Program (GCRP) that allow the USDA to prioritize enrollments for the purpose of at-risk species conservation, habitat connectivity and lands at-risk of development and ensure that any effort to boost enrollment through Continuous and/or General CRP do not adversely impact the success of the program out West.
  - » Address GCRP delivery and implementation challenges by providing necessary capacity, clarifying agency roles and timelines, and increasing flexibility around potential barriers like tree canopy cover, AGI and other requirements for eligibility.
  - » Direct USDA to develop ranking criteria and prioritizing enrollment for lands at-risk of conversion and development.
- Maintain flexibility between CRP sub-programs, increase the GCRP acreage floor to account for increasing producer interest and availability in the West and do not place a percentage-based cap on GCRP acreage.
- Codify USDA's authority to stack technical and financial support across programs, including through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and GCRP.
  - » Ensure that management activities (e.g., compliance with state and local noxious weed laws) required under GCRP are eligible for support through EQIP.
  - » Build on the success of the Wyoming-USDA Big Game Partnership Pilot and apply the authority to "bundle" programs toward achieving multiple conservation objectives.
- Prioritize land moving out of CRP in National Grassland Priority Zones into for enrollment GCRP and provide transition support options to establish these acres as working grasslands.
  - » Include cost-sharing and technical support for fencing, water distribution and other necessary investments.
- Ensure that GCRP acreage does not contribute toward the 25% CRP county acreage cap.
- Allow for targeted enrollment of lands with greater than 5% tree canopy cover, particularly in landscapes facing habitat degradation from encroachment of woody plant species such as eastern redcedar, pinyon and juniper.
- Ensure that CSP provisions that expanded program eligibility to encompass federal land associated with an agricultural operation remain.
- Promote holistic approaches to implementing climate-smart practices that consider not just carbon sequestration or emissions reduction, but also the broader ecosystem health and resilience of western landscapes and communities.

## RATIONALE

In recent years, GCRP has seen record-breaking enrollment across several western states. This is, in large part, due to changes in the 2018 Farm Bill that allow for prioritization of wildlife migration and at-risk species conservation combined with appropriately increased rental rates. Another reason for the popularity of the program out west is the fact that it is a working lands program, allowing grazing and certain other forms of agricultural production to continue with the development of an NRCS-approved management plan.

Despite its success and popularity, the program can still be improved. For example, the approach being piloted in Wyoming to conserve big game migrations on private land that allows EQIP to be stacked on top of GCRP contracts should be codified and expanded to address other conservation priorities. This innovative approach is a win-win for producers and conservation and can be tailored to meet a wide range of objectives.

Codifying this authority to stack GCRP with other programs would also address an impediment to the expansion of the

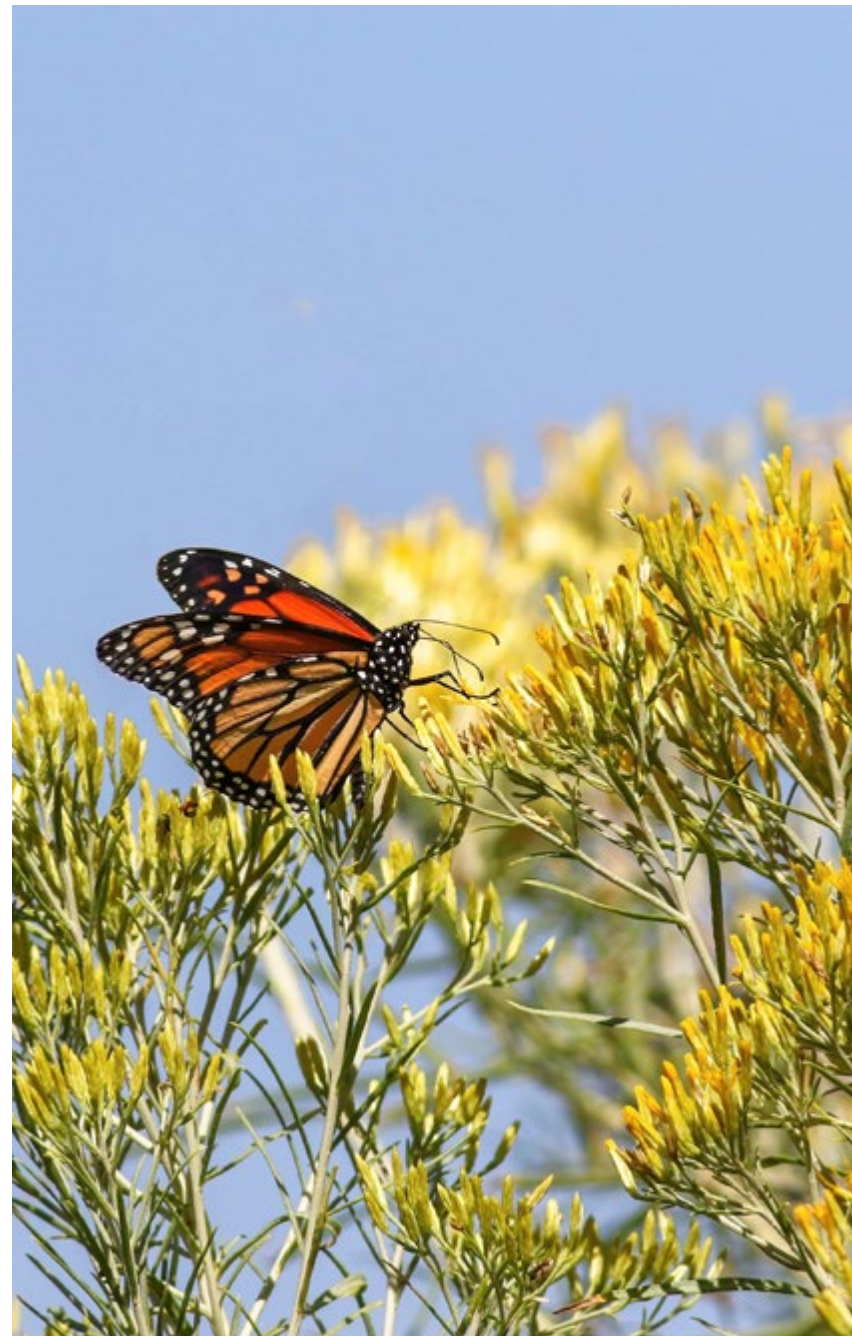
program posed by management requirements. For example, as a condition of enrollment, producers must agree to keep enrolled acres free of noxious and invasive species. In the West, particularly in landscapes facing increasing threat of invasion from cheatgrass and other invasive annual grasses, compliance will require a significant management commitment and capital investment from producers. Allowing EQIP to be stacked with GCRP would address this issue, boost the value and accessibility of programs for producers and amplify conservation outcomes.

Continually re-enrolled CRP cropland contracts on marginal, erosion prone, or ecologically sensitive areas in grassland areas should be provided a streamlined path toward transition into working grassland. This could be accomplished through transition incentives within CRP which would provide support for infrastructure improvements or adjustments. This transition incentive could be expanded for historically underserved producers, and apply toward increased ranking or priority under GCRP and EQIP enrollments.

The Farm Bill currently prohibits the Farm Service Agency from enrolling more than 25% of a county's cropland in CRP at any time. This limitation does not take into account the distinction between different CRP sub-programs and may unnecessarily limit eligibility for producers in the West. General CRP, which broadly focuses on removing highly erodible, environmentally sensitive and/or marginal land from production serves a different purpose from GCRP, which allows enrolled lands to remain in certain forms of production in exchange for land not being developed or converted. Given this difference, GCRP acres should not count toward the 25% county acreage cap.

Invasion of woody plant species on native grasslands represents a considerable and growing risk to grassland ecosystems and the livelihoods of working lands stewards. Existing USDA programs and initiatives, such as Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW), work with producers to address these threats, but could be deployed in tandem with GCRP in certain cases with additional long-term support to producers and conservation benefits.

CSP is intended to promote long-term stewardship across a producer's full operation. In the West, many livestock production operations rely on grazing allotments on neighboring federal lands along with production on their privately owned land. Conservation assistance through CSP should reflect this practical reality and promote holistic conservation and management across an entire operation.



# IMPROVE PROGRAM DELIVERY, ACCESSIBILITY AND RELEVANCE FOR WESTERN PRODUCERS AND COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

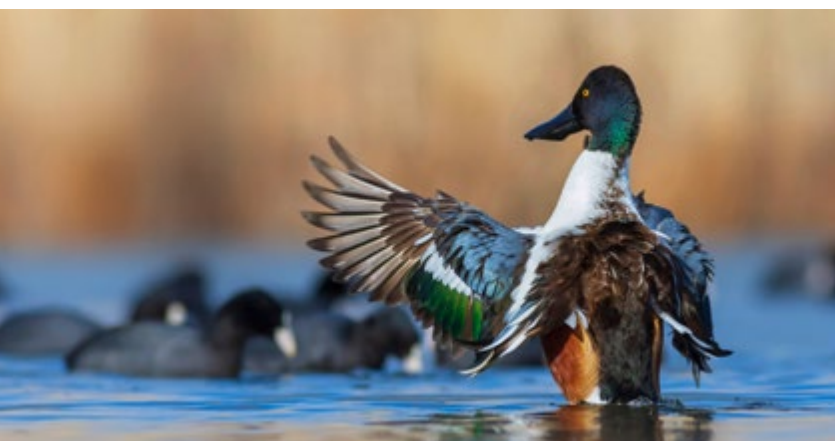
- Reduce the complexity of Farm Bill program delivery and increase accessibility to producers through streamlined application and approval processes, and ensure coordination between USDA agencies in developing management plans.
- Provide dedicated support through the Farm Bill for co-located, “Resource Coordinator” positions embedded within community-based organizations (CBO), land trusts, or other trusted, producer-led local organizations.
- Increase the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) annual rental payment limitation from \$50,000 to at least \$125,000 to account for increasing land prices and inflation.
- Increase accessibility of the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) to community-based organizations, smaller organizations and allow greater focus on locally-determined conservation objectives.
  - » Reserve a portion of funds allocated to projects in Critical Conservation Areas for the purpose of ensuring participation of community-based organizations and entities working with historically under-served farmers and ranchers.
  - » Waive or reduce non-federal match requirements for community-based organizations and historically under-resourced and/or under-served producers.
  - » Reduce, eliminate, or waive partner match requirements to address participation barriers for community-based organizations and historically under-resourced and/or under-served producers.
  - » Ensure that RCPP funding can be applied toward planning assistance, applicant administrative costs, and implementation support.

## RATIONALE

Many federal programs are overly complex, time consuming, and inaccessible to landowners and producers. These barriers hamper the success of Farm Bill programs, are compounded by agency capacity challenges, and ultimately, leave many producers without adequate support for the land and water stewardship they provide. Resource Coordinators build on an already successful model of cost-share positions like “Farm Bill Biologists.” However, these co-located positions would go one step closer to the ground, taking them out of USDA Service Centers and embedding them within local NGOs, community-based organizations, land trusts, producer-led groups, or other qualified, trusted local organizations.

The current CRP annual payment limitation of \$50,000 has not increased since 1985. In the West, this creates a particular challenge for larger ranching operations. The \$50,000 payment ceiling creates a functional acreage cap for the Grassland Conservation Reserve Program (GCRP) and limits the program’s utility in supporting wildlife migration and at-risk species habitat connectivity across large landscapes.

Overly complex program administration, combined with onerous commitments from partners limits the RCPPs practical impact. Smaller organizations, including many community-based organizations, are unable to take advantage of the program or are forced to accept that moving a project forward may result in a financial loss. Given the increasingly severe threats to western communities and ecosystems, RCPP must be improved to deliver on its promise of fostering locally-led and partnership-driven solutions.



# INCREASE FLEXIBILITY FOR LANDOWNERS TO ADAPT TO DROUGHT, IMPROVE WATERSHED HEALTH AND BETTER MANAGE WATER RESOURCES

- Develop a CRP sub-program focused on water conservation similar to the Grassland Conservation Reserve Program (GCRP) to pay producers annually to reduce water consumption through a range of practices or improvements (e.g., switching to less water intensive crops, implementing partial fallowing). This program would compensate producers for lost income opportunity as a result of implementing water conservation measures and would allow continued agricultural production in line with an approved management plan. .
- Increase enrollment in EQIP Conservation Incentive Contracts (CIC) and focus these longer-term contracts on practices that will increase watershed health and drought resiliency.
- In coordination with state water planning efforts, explore opportunities to support the establishment of community-developed water plans and water sharing agreements through RCPP or Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG).
- Expand the range of eligible water quantity practices under EQIP and other Farm Bill programs and ensure that programs are adaptable to long-term water resource challenges.

Prior to the 2022 nationwide rollout of the program, Arizona, California, Colorado and Oregon were selected as CIC pilot states to address pressing issues with drought. In Oregon, producers and state NRCS officials reported success in tailoring CIC funds to meet drought and watershed health resource concerns, including a dedicated Klamath Basin Funding pool.

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## RATIONALE

Landowners and producers in the West are facing the reality of increasingly frequent and severe water shortages. Through previous Farm Bills, producers have options available through the Farm Bill to assist in water conservation and increase drought resilience. However, many of these provisions are underutilized, create potential legal ambiguity for landowners around water rights, or lack flexibility to appeal to a wide range of producers in the West. Just as changes to GCRP tailored to better meet the needs of western land stewards unlocked record breaking enrollments of grasslands, a similar approach to surface water conservation would unlock opportunities for water resource conservation in western landscapes.

# EXPAND FINANCIAL AND TECHNICAL SUPPORT FOR WILDLIFE-LIVESTOCK CONFLICT REDUCTION THROUGH EXISTING CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

- Encourage USDA to develop GCRP National Priority Zones focused on supporting producers in landscapes with predator-livestock conflict.
- Ensure that available funding under both the EQIP livestock and wildlife set-asides is eligible for conflict-reduction practices such as range riding, carcass removal and fencing.
- Create eligibility for community-based organizations to enter into EQIP contracts to implement NRCS approved conflict reduction practices.

## RATIONALE

Farm Bill conservation programs hold untapped potential to support wildlife-livestock conflict reduction work at the producer and community-level through the development of conflict reduction conservation practice standards and dedicated support through EQIP, CRP, RCPP and other programs. Successful delivery of conflict reduction practices will rely on a high degree of trust and a strong understanding of local dynamics, necessitating CBO eligibility for delivery.



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