



WYOMING-USDA BIG GAME CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP IMPACT REPORT



WLA BIG GAME IMPACT REPORT

The Big Game Partnership began in 2022 when Wyoming Governor Mark Gordon and USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack signed a Memorandum of Understanding called: *A Partnership to Conserve Big Game Habitat in Wyoming*. The roots of the Partnership were built from a Wyoming initiative that engaged stakeholders in conserving both wildlife migrations and the working lands that are foundational to Wyoming's economy and way of life. It reorients conservation dollars and incentives to working lands within big game habitat, offering USDA programs with unique benefits.

- **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP):** cost-share for fence removal, herbaceous weed treatment, wildlife-friendly fence, brush management, & water infrastructure.
- **Habitat Leasing via Grassland Conservation Reserve Program (CRP):** In exchange for maintaining wildlife habitat, producers receive annual rental payments. Leases are for 10 or 15 year and livestock production activities (haying and grazing) continue.
- **Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP):** Money for the purchase of the property owner's development rights with continued agriculture activity.
- AGI waivers and enrollment in multiple programs (Grassland CRP & EQIP) possible.
- USDA grants for UW research
- Increased NGO, agency capacity, and coordination to improve program implementation.

This report details the programmatic impact of the USDA Big Game Migration Partnership (Initiative) in Wyoming from 2023 to 2024 on working lands. The Western Landowners Alliance took part in convening landowners and agencies in the years leading up to the big game partnership and has been working to promote and coordinate the package of benefits that are part of this program.

PRIORITY AREAS AS IDENTIFIED BY WYOMING GAME AND FISH:

- Sublette, Baggs, and Platte Valley Mule Deer Migration Corridors
- Wind River Indian Reservation area
 - Absaroka Front



Big Game Priority Areas

INVESTMENTS IN HABITAT STEWARDSHIP AND WORKING LANDS

\$3.9M
IN HABITAT LEASES THROUGH GRASSLAND CRP

\$1.4M
IN LEASES WITHIN BIG GAME HABITAT & MIGRATION CORRIDORS

\$13M
IN CONSERVATION EASEMENTS THROUGH ACEP

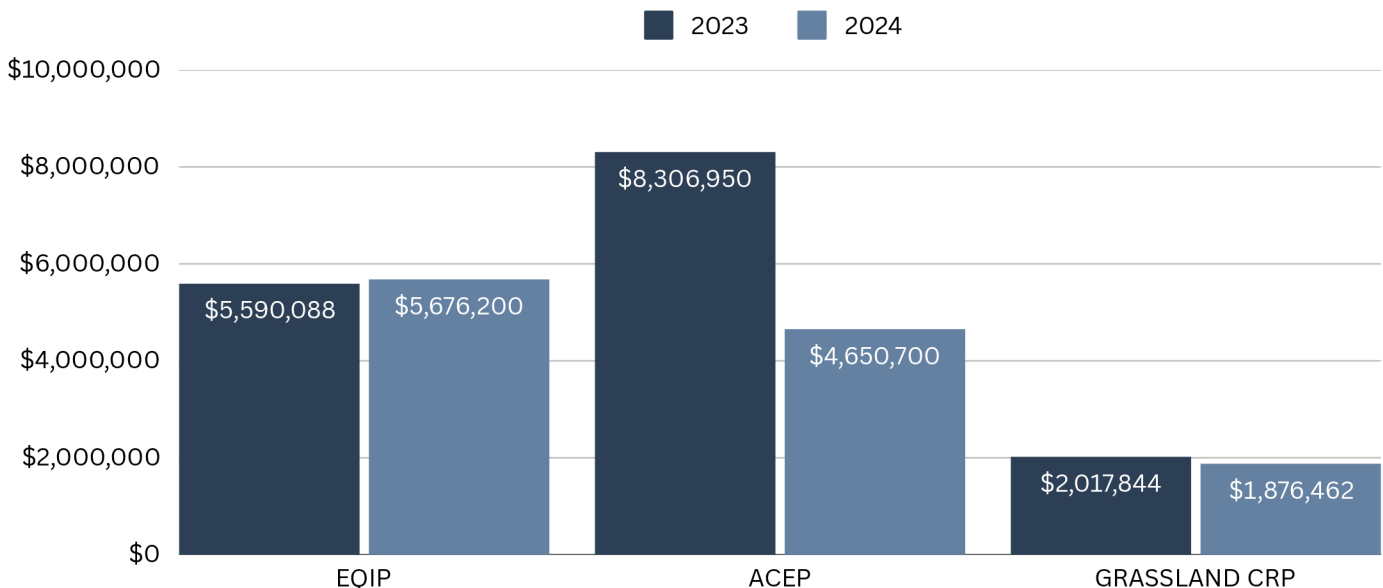
\$11.3M
OF HABITAT IMPROVEMENT PROJECTS THROUGH EQIP



We use our habitat lease payment for buying hay. We don't have much hay ground, so we need to buy around 200 tons a year to feed the cattle in the winter. The cost of hay ranges from about \$145-285 per ton, so the extra income helps with these types of operating costs.

Ronne Hogg of Hogg's Black Diamond Cattle Company in Meeteetse, WY enrolled in Grassland CRP and used EQIP to cover her wildlife-friendly fences. Since enrolling land in the habitat lease, she has received two annual payments in exchange for maintaining forage for wildlife.

PAYMENTS MADE TO LANDOWNERS THROUGH USDA PROGRAMS BY YEAR



CONSERVATION IMPACT

635,080

TOTAL IMPACTED ACRES

29,504 ACRES

IN CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

287,345 ACRES

ENROLLED IN HABITAT LEASING.
(93,145 ACRES OF HABITAT LEASES
WITHIN BIG GAME HABITAT AND
MIGRATION CORRIDORS)

318,231 ACRES

OF HABITAT IMPROVEMENTS: WEEDS
TREATMENTS, WILDLIFE-FRIENDLY
FENCES, BRUSH MANAGEMENT, ETC.)

218.3 MILES

FENCE REPLACEMENT ENHANCING
WILDLIFE-FRIENDLY MIGRATION
CORRIDORS

WILDLIFE-FRIENDLY FENCES IN PRIORITY COUNTIES:

- CARBON: 22.3 • FREMONT: 53.2
- PARK: 60 • SUBLETTE: 82.8

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EQIP has been essential to implementing stewardship practices on our ranch. Enrolling the same land in both Grassland CRP and EQIP enabled us to adopt the practices needed to keep the ranch operational while maintaining our commitment to wildlife stewardship.

**Chris Robinson, Ensign Ranches,
Carbon County, WY**

295% INCREASE IN ENROLLMENT

IN GRASSLAND CRP IN BIG GAME PRIORITY COUNTIES SINCE PARTNERSHIP. THE PARTNERSHIP MADE PRIORITY AREAS ALLOWING PEOPLE TO ENTER INTO A NATIONALLY COMPETITIVE PROGRAM FOR THE FIRST TIME.



SUCCESS BEYOND USDA PROGRAMS

ABSAROKA FRONT INVASIVE ANNUAL GRASS TASK FORCE

WLA is leading a task force to defend core areas of the Absaroka Front from invasive annual grasses. WLA provided grant writing support leading to a \$400,000 Wyoming Wildlife & Natural Resource Trust (WWNRT) grant, administered by Park County Weed & Pest. The grant provides cost-share to landowners to treat cheatgrass on 6,000 acres on private land spread across seven ranches near Meeteetse and on 52,000 acres of public land.

PARK COUNTY BRUCELLOSIS COMPENSATION FUND

East Yellowstone Collaborative and Property and Environment Research Center (PERC) teamed up with Absaroka livestock producers to develop a Brucellosis Compensation Fund to help ease the financial burden of a positive test that results in quarantine. This group shaped a fund to meet the needs and conditions of the Park County producers. The Fund is live and will span a three-year trial period.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Despite its achievements, the Partnership faces challenges. Some landowners find Grassland CRP payments inadequate to justify following management plans, while others struggle with time-consuming application processes, like the 3-5 year timeframe for conservation easements.
- Research by the UW Ruckelshaus Institute indicates significant growth potential for the Big Game Partnership. A 2023 survey of nearly 800 Wyoming landowners revealed that 85% were unaware of the partnership's programs and benefits, yet 55% expressed potential interest in participating if eligible.

Landowners face many challenges keeping their properties intact and economically viable due to development pressures, market conditions and family succession issues. Supporting wildlife can add to the strain, through damages to crops and fences, diminished grass and hay production and loss of livestock to carnivores. The Big Game Partnership aims to address this issue, regarding the producer and their working lands as essential to conserving wildlife and migrations.



THE FUTURE OF THE PARTNERSHIP

- **Big Game Initiative Expands:** In 2023, the Big Game Initiative grew to include Montana and Idaho. Our goal is to improve collaboration with the USDA, ensuring that working lands with big game habitats in these states benefit from opportunities available through the USDA Big Game Migratory Partnership.
- **Advocating for Private Land Stewardship:** In the 2025 Farm Bill reauthorization, WLA will continue advocating for programs that incentivize and reward private land stewardship. Key priorities include increasing the payment cap for Grassland CRP and codifying dual enrollment in Grassland CRP and EQIP to best support landowner stewardship.

GOALS & PRIORITIES FOR THE INITIATIVE IN WYOMING

- Increase outreach to landowners within migration corridors about habitat leasing and cost-share for habitat improvement projects.
- Prioritize outreach to small-acre landowners in migration bottlenecks.
- Apply for another round of WWNRT funding to treat invasive annual grasses along the Absaroka Front.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We extend our gratitude to the State of Wyoming and the dedicated NRCS and FSA staff for their exceptional commitment to supporting Wyoming producers through this Initiative. The success of this effort is made possible by the dedication of USDA local staff, Wyoming Game and Fish, the WYldlife Fund, WWNRT, Park County Weed and Pest, and an array of partners, including the East Yellowstone Collaborative, Greater Yellowstone Coalition, Park County Open Lands, Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust, Jackson Hole Land Trust, PERC, and the Nature Conservancy.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

- [Western Confluence](#) article
- [NRCS Big Game Summary](#)

GOT BIG GAME? WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Contact Shaleas Harrison, 307-254-7819

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The Western Landowners Alliance advances policies and practices that sustain working lands, connected landscapes, and native species