

RESTORING RURAL ECONOMIES • LAND • WILDLIFE AMERICA

Photo by Zach Altman

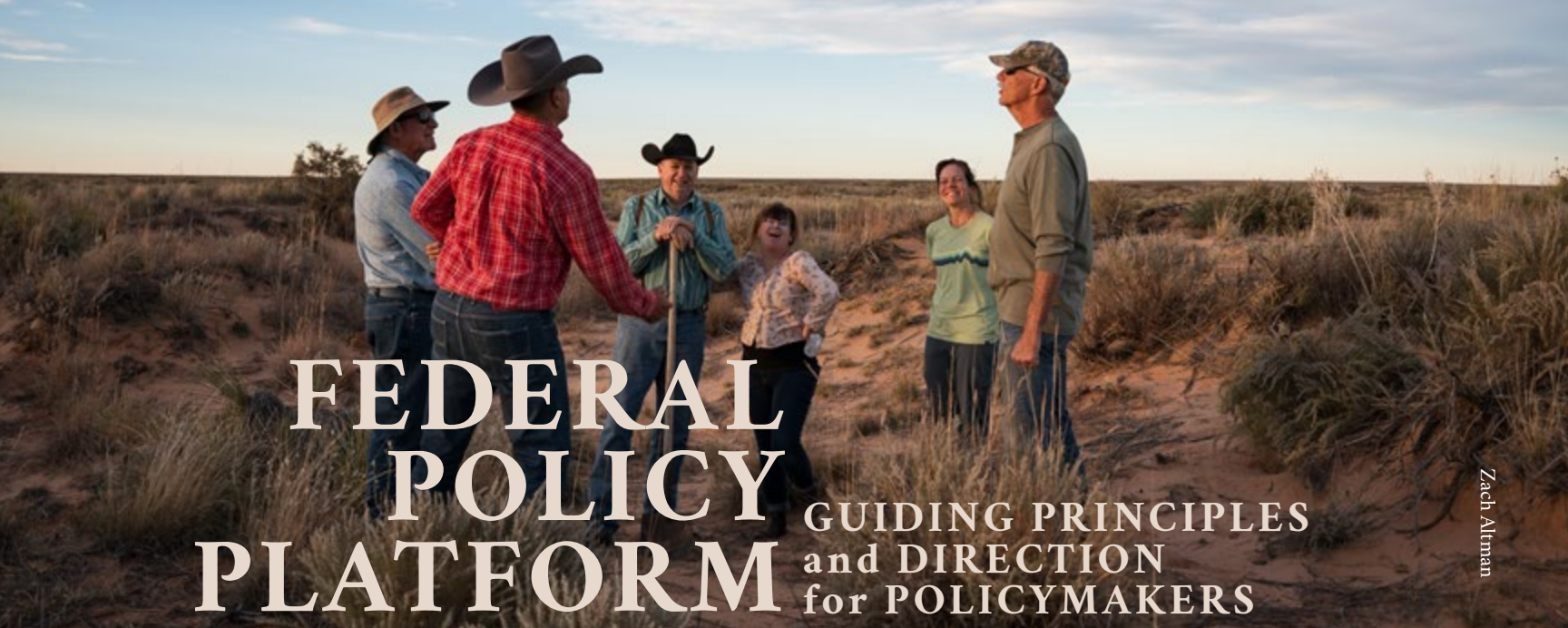


Western Landowners Alliance is dedicated to keeping working lands whole, healthy and productive for the benefit of people and wildlife.

America's working lands provide the food, fiber, water, energy and ecosystems on which we all depend. These vital lands and the people who care for them are cornerstones of our national security, economy and quality of life.

It's not just people who depend on these lands. Eighty percent of wildlife rely on these same private lands for survival. America's croplands, grasslands, timberlands and wildlife habitats—along with the many public and environmental values they provide—are diminishing, posing serious risks to the nation's security and prosperity.

With the right public policies and strategic investments, we can change this. We offer the following guidance and recommendations we believe should be front and center in policy deliberations. Our recommendations are shaped by insights and expertise from landowners, agricultural producers and land managers from across the Western states.



FEDERAL POLICY PLATFORM

GUIDING PRINCIPLES and DIRECTION for POLICYMAKERS

Zach Altman

Respect and prioritize working lands and the people who produce the food, raw materials and energy essential to all Americans.

- Working lands and rural communities must be a national priority.
- Ensure public policies at every level support the conservation, health and productivity of working lands.
- Design policies to strengthen the economic viability of working lands to ensure prosperous rural communities.
- Proactively engage the working lands community in all relevant areas of public policy and administration.

Support the critical role working lands and the people who care for them play in sustaining wildlife and the environment.

- Acknowledge the importance of the landowner's role in conserving and managing grasslands, forests, wildlife habitats and water resources.
- Strengthen the resilience of working lands to drought, wildfire, extreme weather and other changing climate conditions.

- Respect and uphold private property rights.
- Identify and remove regulatory barriers to conservation and stewardship on working lands. Landowners should not be penalized for supporting imperiled wildlife.
- Develop economic drivers such as habitat leasing and environmental markets to support working lands in sustaining wildlife and delivering critical ecosystem services.
- Provide fair compensation to landowners for property damage and income losses related to publicly managed wildlife and energy production.

Take a partnership-based approach.

- Engage the working lands community early and often in policy design and implementation.
- Utilize and expand existing authorities, such as the Good Neighbor Authority and Stewardship Contracting, to promote public-private partnerships and inter agency cooperation.
- Invest in place-based collaborative partnerships for federal program delivery.
- Invest in proactive management, voluntary incentives and collaborative efforts to achieve better conservation

outcomes while saving money and promoting land health.

- Policies should reward proactive, voluntary conservation and ensure that litigation and Endangered Species Act (ESA) listings are a last resort.
- Congress should provide dedicated capacity within federal agencies, including resources and training, to complete National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) processes.
- Federal agencies should improve relationships with landowners by engaging them early in planning to determine appropriate management options.

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The desire to achieve sustainable prosperity while conserving our lands, water and wildlife for future generations is a common-ground, non-partisan goal.

– Lesli Allison, CEO,
Western Landowners Alliance

STRENGTHEN ECONOMIC VIABILITY OF WORKING LANDS & RURAL ECONOMIES



Clenn Oakley

Working lands support people, community and wildlife. We need to keep them in business.

- Improve the delivery of federal conservation programs, including the application, negotiation and payment process, as well as reporting requirements.
- Support landowners in continuing to provide quality habitat through habitat leasing, term and perpetual conservation easements and payment for ecological services.
- Utilize funding vehicles, such as National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and conservation trust funds, that leverage

federal, state and private investment for multi-year stewardship and restoration agreements and initiatives.

- Provide tax incentives for land conservation, including deductions and transferable tax credits for voluntary conservation easements. Conservation easements and tax benefits can relieve financial pressures and make it easier for families to maintain working lands amid development pressures. The transferability of the tax credit is key as it provides landowners an additional financial benefit, particularly if they have a low tax liability.
- Preserve estate tax exemption passed in the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act by extending it beyond 2025.



Jaxon Derow

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The Environmental Quality Incentives Program has been essential to implementing stewardship practices on our ranch. Enrolling the same land in both Grassland Conservation Reserve Program 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

RECOGNIZE & SUPPORT THE ROLE OF PRIVATE LANDS IN CONSERVING WILDLIFE

Landowners are essential partners in wildlife conservation.

Most wildlife in the United States depend on private lands for survival. Landowners appreciate wildlife and actively invest in conserving and restoring habitats and species. However, elk and other big game can damage fencing, compete with livestock for forage, consume crops and carry transmittable disease. Large carnivores—expanding in range and abundance—further increase the potential for direct livestock loss and indirect impacts.

295% INCREASE IN ENROLLMENT

in Wyoming Grassland Conservation Reserve Program big game priority counties since USDA conservation partnership.

- **Expand the successful model of the USDA Migratory Big Game Initiative.**

Wyoming, Montana and Idaho recognize and support the crucial role that working lands play in sustaining wildlife. USDA is focusing resources in big game habitat and streamlining the delivery of programs to work better for private landowners. This partnership-based approach makes federal, state, and private funding available to landowners in priority regions for habitat leasing, conservation easements, big game conflict mitigation, and habitat improvements. There has been a 295% increase in Grassland Conservation Resource Program enrollment in the priority counties since the formation of this initiative.

Read more about this in our [Wyoming USDA Big Game Conservation Impact Report](#).

- **Reduce brucellosis risk** by increasing investments in brucellosis research to develop an effective vaccine for cattle and bison and providing cost-share for separating livestock calving areas from elk during peak brucellosis transmission times. Additionally, ensure support for producers through indemnification programs that offset financial losses incurred due to quarantine measures required for managing brucellosis outbreaks.

- **Support landowners in implementing large carnivore-livestock conflict reduction practices** by providing Natural Resources Conservation Service cost-share for livestock and habitat management via [range riding](#), [fencing](#) practices such as electrified mats and fladry, and [carcass management](#). Continue to support research on emerging technologies and practices to mitigate conflicts.

- **Compensate producers for direct and indirect losses associated with the recovery of large carnivores** by providing an appropriation through the America's Conservation Enhancement (ACE) Act.

- **Revise USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service Wildlife Services standards for depredation investigations** to take into consideration the full body of evidence while utilizing the legal standard of "more likely than not" for determining if an animal has been depredated.

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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, Hogg's Black Diamond Cattle Co, Meeteese, WY



IMPROVE EXECUTION & IMPACT OF THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

Weaver Ranch

2/3 ENDANGERED SPECIES DEPEND ON PRIVATE LANDS

The Endangered Species Act (ESA) is a vital wildlife safety net, yet its implementation can inadvertently hinder conservation by imposing penalties on landowners harboring imperiled species. Policy must recognize the essential role of working lands and private landowners in supporting wildlife, and it should promote collaborative, incentive-based approaches that are economically viable for landowners. Removing regulatory barriers and disincentives can enhance outcomes for both wildlife and people.

- **Implement proactive voluntary conservation to avoid the need to list species under the ESA in the first place and accelerate the recovery and delisting of those already listed.**

- Enhance ESA regulatory certainty for voluntary, landowner-driven conservation through improved access to Conservation Benefit Agreements on both federal and private lands.

- Expand ESA Section 6 grants to support states and NGO partners in developing, monitoring and administering long-term Conservation Benefit Agreements (CBAs).

- Develop written guidance to support U.S. Fish and Wildlife (USFWS) personnel, state agencies, contractors and landowners in developing and administering CBAs.

- Provide targeted and protected funding within both the USFWS Ecological Services and the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program to better support landowners in the voluntary, proactive conservation and recovery of imperiled species.

A habitat lease is a negotiated agreement between the landowner and a federal, state or private entity that provides payment for maintaining wildlife habitat.

Habitat leasing is an example of a partnership-based approach to conservation that respects private property rights, recognizes the value of habitat on private land to wildlife, and enables income diversification to keep working lands intact and working.

ADDRESS CRITICAL WATER RESOURCE MANAGEMENT & DROUGHT

Zach Altman

Water shortages in various parts of the country, and particularly in the American West, pose a critical threat to the future of working lands and all Americans.

- **Increase USDA program delivery capacity** and technical assistance expertise to engage and support producers in water resource management and conservation.
- **Provide a water resources/quality specialist in each NRCS state office** to support irrigation and watershed health improvements.
- **Provide consistent funding to encourage and support large-scale, multi-year watershed restoration projects.**
- **Support voluntary groundwater conservation easements in declining aquifers.**
- **Maintain support for USDA's Risk Management Agency Pasture, Range and Forage Insurance program.**

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The frequency of droughts in the West has increased significantly and with it the economic costs have soared.

The average cost of a drought event in the United States exceeds \$9.5 billion.

Community-based collaborative efforts to restore riparian ecosystems and voluntarily conserve water are key to creating drought resilient agriculture and communities in the West.

– Morgan Wagoner, Western Water Program Director, Western Landowners Alliance



IMPROVE PUBLIC LANDS MANAGEMENT

We need to improve the health and management of multiple-use public lands in the West.

- **Take a partnership approach utilizing Good Neighbor Authority, stewardship contracting and conservation trust funds.**
- **Invest in recruiting, training and retaining a qualified, efficient, service-oriented and adequately staffed federal workforce.** Provide effective “advance-in-place” options for federal personnel to increase place-based knowledge and better facilitate collaborative management. Agency staff responsible for grazing and conservation management on state and federal lands should have training in both rangeland ecology and animal science.
- **Increase grazing management flexibility with retained accountability.**
- **Provide directives and guidance to ensure federal land policies and management consider the economic and ecological impacts to adjacent state, tribal and private lands.**
- **Outdoor recreation management on public lands should consider the impacts of recreation to livestock grazing and other uses, as well as adjacent private property.**

- **In designing federal lands management strategies, including energy and recreation, proactively engage landowners to consider potential impacts and benefits to livestock operations, wildlife and surrounding private lands.** Uphold landowners’ private property rights, ability to control access to their lands and to manage their operations. To address public-private checkerboarding and inholdings, improve voluntary access programs and expedite voluntary land exchanges.
- **Promote and invest in joint cooperative monitoring on public lands** where permittees and lessees partner with land management agency staff to conduct land health monitoring on allotments.
- **Invest in watershed and forest health improvements to safeguard water supplies and mitigate wildfire.**
- **Design post-fire grazing management strategies on federal allotments to meet specific site resource needs, such as invasive weed control, rather than imposing a mandatory two-year rest period.** Managed correctly and adaptively, cattle grazing can be a tool to reduce fuel loads, prevent wildfires and help restore post-fire rangeland.



Melanie Elzinga

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If we can do whatever we do (ranching) in a positive way on this place, maybe it will ripple out into the big world.

– Agee Smith, Cottonwood Ranch, Wells, NV



ENSURE RESPONSIBLE ENERGY DEVELOPMENT

Energy development is necessary to meet the nation's energy and security needs. Energy development in all forms must also be balanced with the conservation of other important agricultural, environmental, natural resource, economic and community values.

- As part of the multiple-use ethic on federal lands, all forms of energy production should minimize their impacts to other land uses such as livestock grazing, private lands, wildlife and water resources.
- Planning for energy development should include appropriate environmental reviews and meaningful public input, including

early and consistent engagement with affected grazing permittees and private landowners. The potential for energy development to impact community values and priorities should be considered along with potential impacts to environmental values.

- Design and installation of energy infrastructure, such as solar field installations, should support multiple use (e.g. agrivoltaics) whenever possible.
- Respect private property rights. Eminent domain should be avoided whenever possible and where it is exercised, landowners must be fairly compensated for losses of land value and land use.





FARM BILL CONSERVATION TITLE RECOMMENDATIONS

The farm bill represents a vital investment in partnership with America's farmers and ranchers to ensure food security, maintain a strong agricultural economy and conserve critical natural resources. The farm bill must include strong economic and technical support for land stewardship, and promote cost-effective locally led conservation initiatives.

- **Improve the delivery and implementation of the farm bill and other federal conservation programs** by streamlining programs, reducing paperwork, increasing agency capacity, improving service quality and efficiency, and partnering with qualified state agencies, conservation districts, contractors and non-profit partners.
- **Encourage USDA to develop Grassland Conservation Reserve Program National Priority Zones** focused on supporting producers in landscapes with large carnivore-livestock conflicts.
- **Ensure available funding under both the livestock and wildlife set-asides under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is eligible for conflict-reduction practices**, such as range riding, carcass removal and fencing.
- **Maintain full funding for programs that work**, including the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), EQIP, Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and Grassland CRP, and Agricultural Conservation Easement Program/Agricultural Land Easements (ACEP-ALE).
- **Increase the CRP annual rental payment limitation** from \$50,000 (set in 1985) to at least \$125,000 to account for increasing land prices and inflation.

- **Increase compatibility between GCRP, ACEP-ALE and EQIP to enable landowners to stack programs** to achieve multiple conservation objectives rather than having to choose between them.
- **Ensure that GCRP acreage does not contribute toward the 25% CRP county acreage cap.** Separate GCRP and CRP acreage caps and provide USDA flexibility to adjust caps annually.¹
- **Allow for targeted enrollment of lands with greater than 5% tree canopy cover**, particularly in landscapes facing degradation from encroachment of woody plant species such as eastern red cedar, pinyon and juniper.²
- **Require meaningful utilization of NRCS state technical committees to engage local producers** in informing, improving and participating in farm bill programs.
- **Create jointly-funded, co-located resource coordinator and technical assistance positions** – housed within NRCS offices and/or producer-trusted conservation districts, community-based organizations and land trusts to work across agencies and provide support and technical assistance to landowners.
- **Reduce the regulatory burdens** and develop more predictable and consistent funding delivery to support the capacity and general operating needs of community-based organizations to assist in the delivery of federal conservation programs and large landscape management collaboration.³
- **Expand financial and technical support for wildlife-livestock conflict reduction** through existing conservation programs and create eligibility for community-based organizations to enter into EQIP contracts to implement NRCS-approved conflict reduction practices.⁴

Endnotes

- 1 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.
- 2 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, 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.
- 3 Locally led collaboration is often the best path to ensuring positive outcomes on the ground for both agriculture and conservation. Place-based, producer-supported, collaborative conservation organizations assemble large-scale conservation projects, conduct educational outreach, provide technical assistance and connect landowners with federal and state resources and programs. They do this successfully based on local knowledge and through trust and relationships built over time. Investment is needed, however, to support the organizational capacity of these local partners to do this important and publicly beneficial work. In turn, these local partners alleviate costs and administrative burdens from federal agencies.
- 4 Producers in large carnivore recovery areas are operating at a significant financial disadvantage and bear a disproportionate cost burden relative to other producers and the general public. Particularly in areas where grizzly bears are expanding, human safety is also a concern and added cost. Farm bill conservation programs hold untapped potential to support conflict reduction 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.

