

# Supporting Wildlife by Supporting Private Lands



## A Western Landowners Policy Guide



**P** rivate landowners are essential partners in wildlife conservation, as the vast majority of wildlife in the United States rely on private lands for survival. The long-term success of conservation efforts hinges on the continued stewardship of these landscapes. However, maintaining them in an intact and healthy state requires substantial investments of time and money on the part of the landowner.

Most landowners deeply value wildlife and many voluntarily invest in habitat and species conservation and restoration efforts. Yet, the presence of wildlife can also create significant costs and challenges. Big game species like elk can damage fencing, compete with livestock for forage, consume crops and carry transmittable disease. Large carnivores - expanding in both range and abundance - can create direct livestock loss or introduce indirect economic burdens through increased management needs and stress-related impacts on livestock health and productivity. The presence of endangered species can constrain property use and limit opportunities to generate income.

Successful and enduring outcomes happen when wildlife enhance, rather than undermine, the economic viability of private lands. To ensure private lands can remain intact and continue to provide critical wildlife habitat, state and federal wildlife agencies must:

1. Evaluate policy and management decisions through the lens of economic impact on private landowners and affected communities. Determine whether proposed policies support or hinder a landowner's ability to keep landscapes undeveloped, whole, and healthy.
  - Ask: Does this policy incentivize or disincentivize landowners to maintain habitat for priority species? Will it impact their willingness or capacity to conserve and steward these lands?
2. Prioritize collaborative, incentive-based approaches that align conservation goals with landowners' economic realities. This includes:

- Respect for private property rights
- Voluntary conservation programs with financial and technical support (e.g., habitat leasing)
- Market-based incentives (e.g., hunting and fishing income, ecotourism opportunities, ecosystem services markets)
- Regulatory certainty and assurance that supports restoration, management and transparency
- Regulatory flexibility that allows for evidence-based adaptive management
- Reduction or removal of disincentives to participation

3. Acknowledge and address the economic burdens associated with wildlife presence and management. Agencies must proactively support solutions that keep wildlife an asset rather than a liability on private lands.

To support wildlife management agencies, policymakers and organizational partners to design policies that promote private land habitat conservation and stewardship, Western Landowners Alliance has developed the following decision-making tool:

