

GRASSLANDS AND THE FARM BILL

Working Together to Encourage the Conservation of Significant and Sensitive Habitats



Scenic view of TNC's Marathon Grasslands Preserve in west Texas. © Jerod Foster

Protecting, managing and restoring intact grasslands—the least protected habitat on earth—is critical to securing clean water, enhancing wildlife habitat, storing more carbon in the soil, and sustaining rural economies.

Grasslands are a critical landscape for livestock agriculture and help to sustain the rural U.S. communities that depend on more than 770,000 cattle operations to feed a growing world.



Bison with a calf in Nachusa Grasslands Preserve, Ill. © Charles Larr

They are also one of the most effective carbon sinks, storing up to 20% of the world's soil organic carbon.

Recognizing the importance of the Farm Bill for ranchers and rural communities, The Nature Conservancy is advocating for a strong bill to ensure that our partners on the land have an opportunity to participate in conserving the very lands that provide their livelihoods and contribute to a secure food system.

These steps will not only benefit those partners but also help the country address climate, water, and biodiversity challenges facing these landscapes and the country.

ENGAGING ON THE FARM BILL

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) has a long history of working with producers, landowners, and other stakeholders across America to create opportunities that conserve natural areas and build more resilient working lands and communities. As owners, operators, and managers of agriculture and forest lands, TNC engages with and advocates for Farm Bill policies and priorities from an on-the-ground, in-field perspective.

TNC'S GRASSLAND AND SUSTAINABLE GRAZING POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FARM BILL

Agricultural Conservation Easements Program (ACEP) – Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) Program

- Set cost share for all easements to be 75% federal-25% partner/landowner and no cost share for grasslands of special significance.
- Expand the definition of “Development Pressure,” used to score ALE easements, to include pressure to convert grasslands to row crops, organic agriculture, and renewable energy sites.
- Authorize easements to be amended or impacts to easement lands to occur without mitigation if the proposed amendments or impacts to easement land would provide a significant ecological improvement to the lands or those nearby.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

- Adopt the adjusted federal cost-share ratios as proposed for ALE-75% federal-25% partner/landowner and no cost share for grasslands of special significance.
- Improve program administration and function by changing references of “Contracts” in enabling language to “Grants.” This change would improve administration to function more like a grant program by:
 - Providing state Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) offices guidance on interpretation and audit process for partner contributions, such as following Office of Management and Budget Uniform Guidance consistently.
 - Within “Technical Assistance,” abolishing implementation and enhancement categorization to reduce administrative burden.
 - Increasing the percent of grant funding for Conservation Technical Assistance to local NRCS offices impacted by RCPP.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

- Encourage native species plantings nationwide using consistent standards.
- Enable grazing on CRP lands by:
 - Allowing installation of perimeter fence and water at any time during the contract and the use of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to cost-share the installation.
 - Allowing fence and water infrastructure cost-share options through CRP, including Practice Incentive Payments to achieve 90% cost-share.

- Provide and incentivize longer-term (e.g., 20–30 years) CRP contracts in high-priority areas to secure long-term environmental benefits.
- Create a pathway for grasslands in CRP to move to ALE, especially if the land has been enrolled for 20 or more years consecutively in CRP.
- Provide higher annual rental payments for CRP’s State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) Initiative. Restore the \$100/acre Signup Incentive Payment for CRP SAFE acres.
- Allow EQIP structural practice cost-share (e.g., short-duration contracts for perimeter fence and water establishment) on active CRP contracts.

Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI)

- Provide mandatory funding for the National Grazing Lands Coalition (formerly known as GLCI) and amend the program’s purpose to add soil health and grazing system resilience.

Environmental Quality Incentive Program

- Designate “Virtual Fencing” as an allowed practice.

Sodsaver

- Require a report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture on the sodsaver program and how many acres have been broken out of native sod.

Conservation Technical Assistance

- Enhance conservation technical assistance to fill both capacity and expertise gaps – this is critical to ensuring ranchers have assistance with developing ranch management plans and applying for conservation programs to assist with plan implementation.



A ranching family herds cows at Dorrance Ranch in California. © Felix Rigau