



Healthy grasslands support wildlife like deer and pronghorn while remaining agriculturally productive for ranchers. © James Claassen/TNC Photo Contest 2023

Conservation Benefits Wildlife and Economy

Landowners pledge to improve 34k acres of mixed- and shortgrass prairie

Last year, landowners pledged to improve nearly 34,000 acres of mixed-grass and shortgrass prairie in Kansas to establish core areas of healthy grasslands that support wildlife and the local ranching economy. Dubbed Generational Grasslands, these landscapes are some of the last remaining places where targeted conservation can outpace threats to grasslands at a meaningful scale.

As many little houses were erected on the prairie—and homesteaders made their living on the range—Kansas grasslands suffered a less romantic fate. Much of the prairie here has been plowed under and converted to cropland. In some places, invasive trees and other plants are taking over. Not enough water is a constant threat. What prairie does remain today is stewarded by ranchers who rely on a healthy prairie to sustain their livestock,

just as the prairie relies on the natural processes of grazing and burning. Here, cattle have largely replaced the bison and elk that once roamed the region, and partnerships with ranchers are the key to large-scale grassland conservation.

With the Generational Grasslands approach, The Nature Conservancy is building on a long history of protecting special places and helping nearby landowners improve rangeland and forage management to improve habitat for wildlife. These focal areas of voluntary, incentive-based conservation include a foundation of permanent protection surrounded by more land where ranchers formally commit to increasing grassland resilience and habitat. Think of it like a bullseye: core areas of protected land that can't be converted—like a TNC preserve or



Generational Grasslands are a places of focused collaboration with livestock producers and communities to uphold a way of life that provides critical ecological goods and services for generations to come. These are core areas of permanent conservation (~50k acres) surrounded by a larger landscape (~150k acres) where producers are increasing grassland resilience. All lands remain viable working lands.



TNC works with cattle ranchers to ensure grassland biodiversity and sustainable grazing practices.
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ranch protected with a conservation easement—anchor a larger area of improved management. Then grassland specialists meet with area ranchers to talk through their options, providing technical advisory services, conservation planning support, and financial incentives to implement effective range management and other conservation practices in their operations. It's all designed to kickstart a positive feedback loop between land stewardship and ranching profitability. Once the Generational Grasslands reach the scale to sustain ecological function and biodiversity over time, around 200,000 acres, then attention can shift to the next place with similar potential.

“Being strategic about where we target conservation efforts is essential,” says Matt Bain, who leads the Generational Grasslands work for TNC. “This is not just any conservation in any place. We’re targeting regions with exceptional, at-risk biodiversity and natural resources. In the end, lesser prairie-chicken and other grassland birds will have better habitat and these lands will be more resilient to future drought. We’ll also see benefits called ecosystem services like carbon being stored underground in soil and cleaner water.”

It’s all part of TNC’s Southern High Plains Initiative, aiming to conserve a network of lands and waters spanning 71 million acres in Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas to boost climate resilience, preserve biodiversity and support sustainable rural communities. The first two Generational Grasslands projects are based primarily in Kansas. In the Chalk Bluffs of northwestern Kansas, the work focuses on protecting remnant tracts of prairie, restoring crop fields back to native prairie plant species, and improving drought resilience. In the Red Hills of south-central Kansas (and extending into Oklahoma), one of the highest priorities is controlling the rapid spread of eastern red cedar trees. By the end of 2023, landowners in both locations had enrolled a combined 33,937 acres for enhanced management before funding ran out for the year.

“Visiting with landowners to hear the stories about their land is a special privilege I get by working in conservation that I didn’t anticipate when I started,” says Mason Scheetz, a TNC grassland specialist in the Chalk Bluffs.

NATURE KANSAS

Why We Graze Grasslands

Every species plays a role in an ecosystem. For grasslands, grazing animals like bison, elk and pronghorn helps keep the prairie, well, *prairie*. These animals eat grasses that might otherwise dominate the landscape, giving numerous other plant species a chance to thrive—plants like milkweed that pollinators need to survive. Grazing can create areas of short vegetation required by some birds, like horned lark. The areas they don’t graze can become dense thatch that provides cover for nesting birds like prairie-chickens. Without key ecological processes like grazing and fire, invasive species can overrun prairie or eventually turn it into a forest.



Horned lark © Bob Gress

Prairies are important ecological systems not just because of their critical wildlife habitats. They are also valued for their agricultural productivity. Prairies need to be grazed, and domestic livestock need places to graze. The modern reality is that, wherever grasslands remain in North America, it is because they have been grazed by cattle rather than plowed for crops or otherwise developed. Ranching protected the prairie, but ranchers now face the challenges of responsibly managing an ecosystem that others took for granted. Working with the ranchers who steward the last of the prairie here is the only path toward conservation success in grasslands.