

Tipping the Scales for Conservation: Leveraging USDA Farm Bill Funding to Conserve Grassland Habitat and Build Working Partnerships

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North American grasslands have and continue to decline at an alarming rate, with a conversion rate of 1.2 million acres of land per year. Coinciding with this extreme loss of habitat, grassland birds have been identified as one of the fastest declining avian suites, with a 53% reduction in population since the 1970's. Most grasslands, meanwhile, remain under private ownership making the conservation of private lands through partnerships with agricultural producers ever more critical. In July 2020, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, in partnership with the Natural Resource Conservation Service and Montana FWP, developed a Targeted Implementation Plan (TIP) in Dawson County under the USDA Farm Bill. This program leverages federal funds to assist producers in restoring cropland back to perennial cover for wildlife, while also developing fencing and water infrastructure for livestock to allow these restored grasslands to be productive grazing lands for producers. During the 2021 application period, the program received five applications resulting in approximately 1,300 acres planned for restoration back to grass. Plans are set to be ranked in March, and pending funding, will be implemented beginning as soon as spring of 2021. Building off the momentum of this TIP, a questionnaire to gauge interest in a second funding pool was sent to producers in another part of Dawson County in winter 2020, with a goal of creating more grassland connectivity. Producers demonstrated a positive response to the questionnaire, resulting in the ongoing development of another proposal to restore grasslands in the northern portion of Dawson.