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## **MONTANA'S FIRST NRCS COOPERATIVE CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE: RESTORING RANGLANDS FOR PRIORITY BIRDS IN EASTERN MONTANA**

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The 2008 Farm Bill introduced the cooperative conservation partnership initiative (CCPI), a new initiative designed to leverage resources from outside the USDA to assist agricultural producers in coordinated efforts to address environmental challenges in their region. Proposed by the Environmental Defense Fund, locally-based Ranchers Stewardship Alliance, The Nature Conservancy and the World Wildlife Fund, "Restoring Rangelands for Priority Birds in Eastern Montana" is the first CCPI supported by the Natural Resource Conservation Service in Montana. With Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks as a new partner this CCPI is dedicated to preserving one of the few remaining strongholds of untilled native grass and shrub lands in the plains of eastern Montana with the long-term goal of reversing the trend of declines among grassland birds. The CCPI covers over 300,000 acres of private lands within the 1.5 million ac landscape in South Phillips County, Montana. Private landowners will play a crucial role in conserving grassland birds by supporting the initiative's goal to increase habitat structural diversity over space and time on each participant's ranch. This will be accomplished through a combination of grazing and burning strategies and practices applied to promote structural heterogeneity in vegetation at varying scales. The CCPI will provide the technical and financial resources private landowners need to continue the kind of stewardship that sustains healthy habitat for priority grassland birds, and a healthy bottom line for their ranching operations.