

Topic: Great Plains Grassland Summit: Challenges and Opportunities North to South - Abstract

TITLE: Our National Grasslands: Highlighting the History, Roles, and Benefits

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides leadership on food, agriculture, natural resources, rural development, nutrition, and related issues based on sound public policy, the best available science, and efficient management.

The USDA's vision is to expand economic opportunity through innovation, helping rural America to thrive; to promote agriculture production sustainability that better nourishes Americans while also helping feed others throughout the world; and to preserve and conserve our Nation's natural resources through restored forests, improved watersheds, and healthy private working lands.

As part of the OneUSDA team, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), works in tandem with many of the USDA agencies, including the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), the Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS), Rural Development (RD), and other USDA agencies to implement the USDA vision while serving the American people as an effective, efficient, and customer-focused department.

National Grasslands, which became part of the National Forest System in 1960 in response to the 1930s Dust Bowl, contribute to the USDA vision and our nation's strength in a variety of ways. The Grasslands generate \$1.4 billion dollars in annual revenue to the National Treasury from minerals production and help stabilize the boom-and-bust nature of these economies in rural communities. Grasslands contribute to food security by providing pasture and forage for animals used for meat and milk production. Thunder Basin National Grassland, located in USFS Region 2, is home to one of the largest coal mines in the country; coal mines on all grasslands produce 20% of the Nation's coal, as well as over 50% of the Nation's low-sulfur heating oil.

National Grasslands also directly serve their surrounding communities by providing ecological services that protect soil from erosion, offer a dependable supply of summer forage, sequester carbon, pollinate crops, and protect watersheds. Over 125 rural communities across 12 states are within or adjacent to the Grasslands or National Tallgrass Prairie. More than half of those would likely disappear without the presence of the Grasslands.

The 20 National Grasslands and Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie currently comprise nearly four million acres of diverse terrain. The majority of the acreage (3,161,771 acres, 82%) is composed of seventeen grassland units located on the Great Plains. Two-thirds of grassland acres (2.1 million acres) fall within USFS Region 2 (Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota).

Grasslands and prairies are the world's most imperiled ecosystem. Although only 2% of the original North American Prairie remains, the National Grasslands (currently 4.1 million acres) encompass 54% of this remaining prairie. The National Grasslands' unique geologic features, plants, and animals represent some of the best examples of grasslands and prairie ecosystems in the world.



Over one million people visit the grasslands, annually, to hunt, fish, hike, bike, or to simply explore these expansive, yet subtly intricate landscapes. As stewards of the National Grasslands, we must tell their stories and foster the deep connections between people and these special places.

Our National Grasslands, rich in history and biological diversity, represent one of the greatest conservation stories in North America and play a unique and critical role within the U.S. Forest Service in meeting the agency mission “to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.”

