

Prairie
PONDERings

North Dakota
Natural Resources Trust

Sod's Saving Grace?

New Farm Bill May Include Provision to Protect Native Grassland

The Great Plains ecosystem and grass go together like ham and eggs. Yet, the prairie that formed thousands of years ago is one of the most altered ecosystems on earth. It represents what this part of North America once was, and its place in the life cycle of hundreds of species of migratory birds and other wildlife is legendary. In a sense, it defines North Dakota and speaks to why we are special, unique, and apart from other states. It provides a basis for a natural resource heritage lost in most other places on this continent and is the underpinning of our grassland agriculture industry, a good fit for land of high ridges, steep slopes, and glacial depressions called wetlands. Is the grass worth keeping, or just a passing phase to be replaced as soon as possible by "higher" more "valuable" uses? Both agricultural and conservation interests have strong feelings on both sides of the issue, and it is worthy of a national public policy debate. In this article, we've tried to frame the issue and present both sides. As North Dakotans, we all have a lot at stake.

- Keith Trego, executive director, North Dakota Natural Resources Trust

The Many Benefits of Grasslands

The Prairie Pothole Region is home to one of the largest grassland ecosystems in the world. Along with millions of wetlands and the grasslands that surround them, the region provides wildlife habitat and is the heart of the breeding range for many ducks, shorebirds, and numerous grassland dependent songbirds.

One of the biggest benefits of grasslands is that it keeps the ranching community in tact. "Grass is the product of a ranch, the cattle are a by-product," says Gene Goven, a longtime rancher from Turtle Lake. "You can't have cattle without the grass to support them. You have to be a grass manager first and a cowboy second."

"The benefits of grass to wildlife are parallel to the benefits of grass to cattle in pounds per acre. It's all tied together," Goven says. And grass needs livestock, too. Goven says that heavy, season-long grazing has nearly the same effect as long-term, idle rest as far as root depth goes. This simulates the grazing pattern of the buffalo that roamed the area hundreds of years ago. They grazed the grass until it was gone, aerating it with their hooves, then moved on to greener pastures, where they did the same thing.

Little bluestem is one of the many native grass species found in North Dakota.

Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS





Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS

The Prairie Pothole Region's grasslands and wetlands provide both a food and water source for cattle.

It's a true symbiotic relationship because both cattle and wildlife need grass and water – the components which are found in abundance in the Prairie Pothole Region. The grass serves as a food source for cattle, and the wetlands are a water source. When grasslands are preserved, it helps preserve the wetlands within them. These wetlands attract waterfowl, and the grass in the uplands is the perfect nesting place. More than half of the remaining 5.9 million acres of unprotected wetlands in the Prairie Pothole Region of the Dakotas are found in the midst of native grasslands.

“The wetlands on my ranch are valuable to me,” Goven says. “When they're wet, they are a great water source for my cattle. When they're dry, they are an excellent hay source.”

Grasslands also improve water quality, serving as a filter that prevents sediment from running off to lakes and rivers. And there isn't nearly as much chemical runoff as with farming, where fertilizer and herbicides are used on a regular basis.

**Breaking Up The Prairie,
An Unintended Consequence Of The Past Farm Bill**

Between 2002 and 2006, just short of 400,000 of the remaining native prairie acres were plowed up and replaced by cropland across the Dakotas and Montana. This is the result of technological advances and unintended consequences of federal farm policy, including price supports and risk protection exclusively available to crop producers. These subsidies make farming somewhat profitable even when high yields are not achieved, which is often the case, because much of the grasslands in the Dakotas are



Nearly 400,000 acres of native prairie in the Dakotas and Montana have been plowed up and converted to cropland.

considered “highly erodible,” which is not best suited for farming.

Meanwhile, grasslands are the lifeblood for ranchers, the producers that seem to be forgotten in much of the farm bill discussion. Land prices are rapidly rising for native grassland in parts of the region where grassland conversion is rampant. This is making it nearly impossible for existing ranchers to expand, or for beginning ranchers to get started in the business. Data for several counties in central North Dakota indicate that pastureland values have seen average increases from 10.1 percent to 14.9 percent since 2002.

Sodsaver

Grasslands are some of the most diverse ecosystems on earth, yet they have little federal protection. Many ranchers, conservation groups, and even farm organizations



Millions of wetlands and the grasslands that surround them provide habitat for many ducks, shorebirds, and numerous grassland-dependent shorebirds.

believe that well-crafted farm policy could dramatically reduce the loss of native prairie. For this reason, Ducks Unlimited, along with several of its conservation partners, proposed a “Sodsaver” provision for the next farm bill.

Sodsaver would eliminate federal subsidy support of any kind on any new cropland acres that are put into production as a result of breaking grassland that has no previous cropping history. “Sodsaver is an effort to slow the conversion of grassland to cropland,” says Scott McLeod, regional biologist for Ducks Unlimited’s Great Plains Regional Office. “There is a good reason why this land hasn’t been farmed, it’s marginal for farmland but perfect for grass.”

While the 2002 Farm Bill has a “Sodbuster” provision, many feel it is ineffective at stopping grassland loss because it applies only to highly erodible land, and the only requirement needed to get around it is to develop a conservation plan. “The conservation plans they refer to are basically agreements to practice no-till farming,” McLeod says. The ineffectiveness of Sodbuster has been well documented in both a 2002 Governmental Accounting Office Report and 2002 Office of Inspector General Audit Report on USDA’s compliance with highly erodible land provisions.

The name Sodbuster also carries a negative connotation. Sodsaver, however, states that landowners are free to plow the native prairie on their land, but if they do so, their profits from this land will be determined on free market economics, not federal subsidies. This is welcome news to many ranchers. Wendi Rinehart is a rancher in central

South Dakota, who says, “I am disgusted with the misuse of my tax dollars. The ranching community has found it is paying the government to fund farm programs that put us out of business. Our tax dollars are being used to compete against us, supporting crop production on newly-broken rangelands that are completely unsuitable for farming.”

Mixed Reviews

Like most every other agricultural issue, Sodsaver has proponents and opponents. This spring, a letter was sent to the Senate Ag Committee by the National Pork Producers Council, American Farm Bureau Federation, National Association of Wheat Growers, National Corn Growers Association, USA Rice Federation, United Egg Producers, and the National Cotton Council. The letter stated several reasons why the groups oppose Sodsaver. They feel the current farm bill adequately addresses the issue of highly erodible lands. “This effort comes at a time when policymakers are looking to working agricultural lands to be more productive,” the letter says. “Current federal policy holds that highly erodible land must be farmed according to a sound erosion control plan, and that failure to do so subjects farmers to possible loss of 100 percent of their federal farm program benefits.” The groups say that while this policy was difficult for farmers at first, they have come to accept it and abide by it. “It is imperative that federal policies allow farmers to adapt to these changes and needs and not lock farmers out from land that could be essential to the welfare of a growing population with growing needs,” the letter explains.

The groups say that such a provision would make it difficult for beginning farmers to get into the business. "It is hard enough already for young farmers, given the financial demands and sacrifices needed to start a modern farming operation, particularly in some parts of the country where these currently untilled lands could be key to the success of a new farmer."

They also believe there is inadequate data about the issue to determine whether there even is a problem.

The Northern Great Plains Working Group, a coalition of several organizations and agencies committed to the continuance of wildlife benefits for farm bill initiatives in the Dakotas and Montana, sent a rebuttal letter to the Committee refuting its claims and saying the producer groups' reasons are unfounded. In response to the claim that current farm policy adequately addresses the issue, the Group says that Sodbuster does not prevent conversion of native grassland habitats to cropland – that there is no balance between what can be brought into production and what cannot. It cites a 2003 USDA report, which indicates that objectives for erosion control on highly erodible land in the Dakotas are not always being met, and more than half of these lands in North and South Dakota are eroding at levels above soil loss tolerance rates. The Group also believes that farm bill provisions shouldn't be restricted to highly erodible land.

In regard to the ag groups' claim that a Sodsaver provision could prevent beginning farmers from getting into the business, the conservation group says, "The fact that these lands have not been tilled since settlement of the plains speaks volumes about their appropriate use. Encouraging beginning farmers to purchase and till these lands to get into the business sets them up for certain failure and/or permanent reliance on federal subsidies. Sodsaver would not prevent a farmer from tilling up land that truly has productive potential."

The agricultural groups also say there is insufficient information to conclude that there is a problem with native grass conversion, but the conservation group says, "A recent report clearly indicates that there is a problem in the Prairie Pothole Region of the Dakotas. While some of the data have not been updated since 2002, pressure to convert native grasslands habitats has only increased since then."

While the North Dakota Farm Bureau does not have an official stance on Sodsaver, Public Policy Director Brian Kramer says Sodsaver is the type of program the group doesn't support. "Sodsaver has the same feel as some of the other regulatory wetland protection programs, which cause considerable consternation to farmers. We do however, support voluntary and compensatory conservation programs, but not those that are punitive in nature, as we believe this one to be."

Not all farmers' groups are opposed to Sodsaver, however. Dale Enerson, an economist with the North Dakota Farmers Union, says there seems to be a consensus among members of his group that farmers have broken up all the prairie they should, and the rest should be left as-is. "North Dakota farmers are practical folks," he says. "They know that if most of the grasslands that exist today were plowed up, they would spend the rest of their lives picking up rocks."

The U.S. House of Representatives passed its version of the new farm bill on July 28, and the Senate plans to begin its markup this month. While the House's version does include a Sodsaver provision, it isn't exactly the same as the original. It states that landowners who choose to break up native prairie are not eligible for federal crop insurance on the newly broken acres for four years. "It's a step in the right direction, but we would like the ineligibility to extend to all federal payments, including conservation," McLeod says. "The native grassland North Dakota has left is one of our state's jewels and a national treasure. We need to preserve it. It is the lifeblood of our ranching community, essential for clean water and critically important to our waterfowl and wildlife resources."

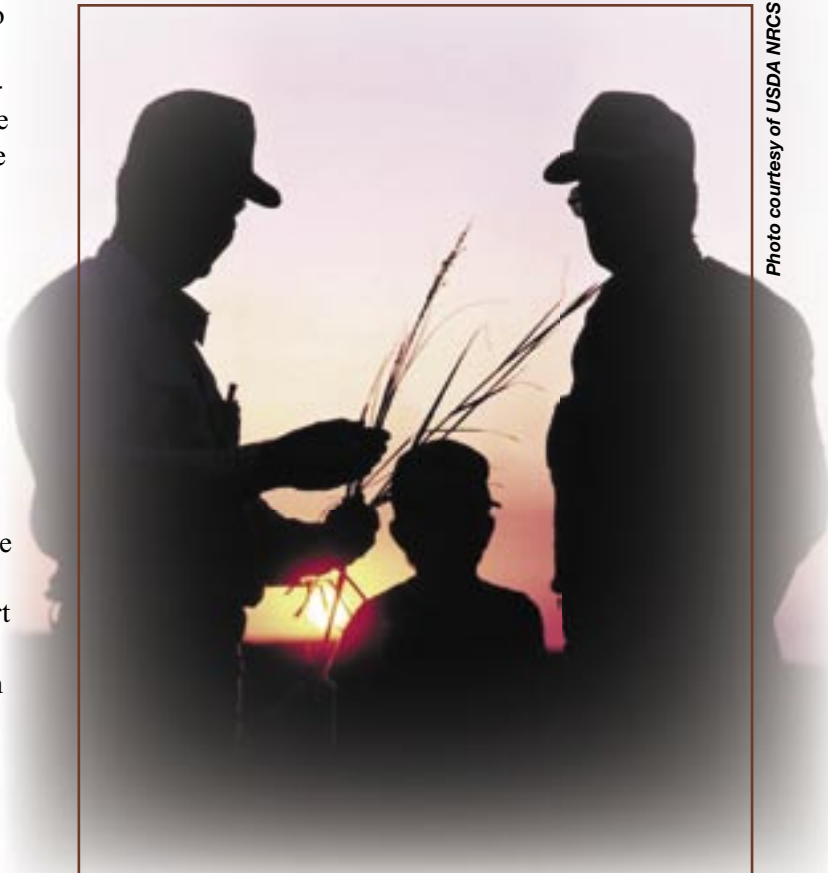


Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS

"We live in the best shortgrass prairie in the nation. It is its own commodity and the best place to raise a family."

- Rancher Wendi Rinehart