



## Defenders of Wildlife

# Agricultural Stewardship in America



## Improving Grassland Habitat Through the Farm Bill

Grasslands are home to thousands of plant and animal species and share a rich part of America's history. Millions of bison once grazed the tall grass prairies of the Great Plains. Dozens of bird species depend on grassland habitat for nesting and foraging.

European settlement and expansion converted many grasslands into pasturelands for livestock or plowed the prairies for agricultural development. Our "amber waves of grain" are a symbol of what America's grasslands have given its people—rich, open land that supports healthy crops.

Unfortunately, only a small percentage of America's original prairie grasslands remain today. Many grassland-dependent bird species, such as prairie chickens, mountain plovers and long-billed curlews, have declined sharply in recent years. Fortunately, Farm Bill programs are helping to restore grasslands, improve grazing management and save farms and ranches from urban sprawl.

## Grassland Reserve Program

### What is GRP?

The Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) is an incentive program created under the Farm Bill in 2002 to provide financial and technical assistance in restoring America's grasslands. Like other conservation programs in the Farm Bill, it is a voluntary program offered nationwide to private landowners.

Under the program, landowners enter into an agreement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) under long-term contracts or permanent easements. Land that is currently grassland, pastureland, rangeland or otherwise supports shrubs or forbs is eligible. By entering into a GRP agreement, a landowner agrees to create healthy grassland habitat for plant and animal species. In addition, the landowner protects the land from conversion to urban development or industrialization.

Grasslands are the most widespread form of land cover on private lands in the United States, comprising more than 525 million acres. The quality of America's grasslands is directly linked to the health of our ecosystems and the abundant wildlife these important habitats support.

# FARM BILL SOLUTIONS: Grasslands and Wildlife

## GRP Helps Birds

Grassland birds can be found in all 50 states. These birds rely on grasslands for nesting, foraging and migration. A study conducted by the U.S. Geological Survey found that grassland bird populations have declined more than other birds. Through good stewardship practices under the GRP, landowners can improve grassland habitat and aid in the survival of grassland birds.

## Improving Habitat

**Rotational Grazing** – Rotational or deferred grazing can benefit both landowners and bird species. Improved grazing management can increase the quality and quantity of forage available for livestock, while giving grassland bird species the opportunity to nest and raise their young.

**Fencing** – Fencing portions of land can protect grassland birds and their nests from grazing livestock. Fencing also gives landowners more control and flexibility in managing livestock

**Wetland Restoration** – Many grassland birds rely on habitats that consist of wetlands and grasslands. Restoring wetlands can increase habitat for many

grassland bird species and may also increase forage for livestock.

**Prescribed Fire** – Fire is a natural part of grassland ecosystems. Through GRP, landowners can get technical assistance with using prescribed burning to improve the quality of soil and eliminate woodland shrubs and trees, thus preserving the area as grassland habitat.

## WRP Helps Sage Grouse

In the spring of 2005, the NRCS awarded the first Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) easement in southeastern Montana.

This permanent easement will restore approximately 2,985 acres of grasslands and 500 acres of wetlands. Included in the project are the development of nesting cover and the restoration of sagebrush habitat. This will provide habitat for sage grouse and other grassland birds that rely on sagebrush for nesting and foraging.

## WHIP for the Birds

Another landowner in Montana is also taking advantage of stewardship opportunities afforded under the Farm Bill. Through the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), this rancher is using

© GARY KRAMER/USFWS



875 acres for rotational grazing and habitat conservation. In addition to rotating livestock, he has put up fencing to preserve grassland habitat and is using an alternate water source to preserve wetland habitat. Species benefiting include grouse, grassland songbirds and the threatened mountain plover.

For more information, please contact:  
**Frank Casey, Ph.D.**  
Defenders of Wildlife  
Phone: 202-682-9400  
Email: [fcasey@defenders.org](mailto:fcasey@defenders.org)

© JEFF VANIGA/USDA NRCS



**Defenders of Wildlife**

1130 17th Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20036-4604

tel 202-682-9400 | fax 202-682-1331

[www.defenders.org](http://www.defenders.org)

♻️ PRINTED ON RECYCLED PAPER

For the latest updates, visit <http://www.biodiversitypartners.org/incentives/index.shtml>