



2026 PLOWPRINT REPORT: POLICY BREAKOUT

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Much of the cropland expansion this 2026 Plowprint Report documents happened on land poorly suited to annual crops, where conversion trades a resilient grass-based system for one that carries more risk for producers, for taxpayers, and for the ecosystem.

[Read the full report](#)

Reducing conversion at the scale the data describes will take work in both directions—removing the incentives that make plowing grassland a rational financial decision, and strengthening the programs that help landowners keep grass in grass or restore previously plowed ground. It will also take work at every scale, from the individual rancher weighing whether to reseed a failing field, to the state, Tribal, and federal policies that determine whether that decision is affordable.

FIVE POLICY PRIORITIES FOR NORTH AMERICAN GRASSLANDS:

1. Keep grasslands intact and reduce conversion risk
2. Restore marginal cropland to grass and support sustainable grazing
3. Strengthen conservation delivery and coordination for cattle and bison grazers
4. Advance landscape-scale grassland conservation
5. Strengthen Tribal leadership in grassland stewardship and food sovereignty



Between 2020–2024, the U.S. lost 2.1 million acres of grasslands to conversion, of which 1.2 million acres were grasslands plowed up in the Great Plains. Policy can either contribute to that loss or help keep grasslands intact, and the scale of continued conversion means we need to do both better: reduce incentives that put grasslands at risk and strengthen policies that help landowners conserve, manage, and restore

them. Existing government programs provide an important foundation, but more targeted investment and policy innovation are needed to sustain the Great Plains' grasslands and the wildlife, rural livelihoods, food production, water, and communities that depend on them. Solutions must work at multiple scales, from giving individual landowners better tools, data, and incentives to advance state, Tribal, and federal policies that keep grassland landscapes intact.

To address grassland loss, we must work across different scales, advancing opportunities for individual ranchers and landscape scale policies and programming. Meaningful solutions will engage leadership of state and federal agencies and support ongoing coordination between the two. We need more effective solutions to the policies and economic pressures that contribute to grassland conversion, while strengthening Farm Bill programs that help ranchers keep grasslands intact, manage them sustainably, and restore marginal cropland to grass.

1. Keep grasslands intact and reduce conversion risk

The Plowprint Report makes it very clear that conversion continues to be an urgent threat in the Great Plains. Science and experience have taught us that the landscape of the Great Plains is highly resilient when it is grassland, but when crops take the place of grass, the soils and landscape become highly marginal and its productivity highly questionable. Combining the Plowprint data on conversion with maps and data on crop insurance payments makes clear that we must address the driver of subsidized crop insurance if we are going to be effective in protecting grasslands, taxpayers, and the ability of farmers and ranchers to make resilient choices. USDA provides significant crop insurance subsidies for major commodity crops like corn, wheat and soybeans—60–80%—even if those crops fail repeatedly, such as on highly marginal lands better suited to grass. [Link](#) This encourages continued crop production even if restoration to grass is the better, more resilient option. Currently, billions of taxpayer dollars are spent in high-risk areas on crop insurance payouts each year, and with indemnity payments far exceeding what farmers pay for crop insurance in much of the country, especially in high-risk areas like the Great Plains. Recognizing that con-



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verting grasslands to cropland is problematic, the Sodsaver provision disincentivizes such actions by reducing crop insurance subsidies on newly plowed grasslands. At present it is too limited, applying only in the states of IA, MN, NE, SD, ND and MT. The reduced subsidy also ends after 4 years, providing only a minimal deterrent on conversion and only in those six states. Overall, these flaws in the crop insurance system create peril for the crop insurance system itself, as well as the countless farmers in high-risk farming situations, and extract far too high a price on both taxpayers and our natural resources. On top of this, the push for biofuels has stimulated demand for corn and soy, further exacerbating the conversion we see in this year's Plowprint numbers.

- **Expand and strengthen Sodsaver:** Currently, if farmers plow up grasslands to plant new crops, Sodsaver provisions only limit crop insurance subsidies in six states, and that limitation is only 50 points for 4 years. Congress should expand and strengthen Sodsaver to discourage continued plowing of grasslands, making the program national and eliminating any crop insurance subsidy on newly converted grasslands for 10 years.
- **Address high risk in crop insurance incentives:** Congress should specify that continued high-risk or unsustainable management that results in ongoing crop failure does not qualify as good farming practice and will result in loss of crop insurance subsidies. As a starting point, subsidies

should be stripped for any of the following situations: if a crop receives an indemnity 3 out of 5 years, is consistently underperforming (4 out of 5 years), or has a loss ratio above 1.2 over 5 years. If a farmer continues to farm the same crop on those acres, premium crop subsidies for that crop on those acres should be discontinued. Congress should also specify that it is not a good farming practice to convert grassland to produce an annual crop, and premium subsidies will be discontinued on crops produced on recently converted grasslands. Congress should leverage savings from avoided crop insurance payouts to fund conservation incentive support for producers who opt to change from unsustainable to resilient management as a result of this change in good farming practice definition.

[Link](#)

- The past two decades have shown that biofuels policies can significantly impact both the transportation and agricultural sectors. Policies have primarily focused on GHG intensity with insufficient attention on the significant impacts on water quality and quantity, biodiversity, soil health, and conversion of grasslands, rangelands, forests, and other habitats. Moving forward, Congress and the Administration should advance new or revised biofuels policies that prevent conversion of grasslands and other habitats, improve accounting of impacts to biodiversity and water, and balance needs of food and fuel alongside effective assessment of greenhouse gas outcomes.

2. Restore marginal cropland to grass and support sustainable grazing

Given the pace of conversion documented in this year's Plowprint Report, 1.2 million acres converted between 2020–2024 in the Great Plains, we need to both dramatically slow conversion rates and pick up the pace of restoration, improving and investing more in programs to put marginal lands back in grass. Many farmers and ranchers face barriers when transitioning marginal cropland back to grass or keeping restored grasslands intact, even when crop production is unprofitable due to sustained low yields on marginal lands better suited to grass and livestock grazing systems. Policies that will help restore marginal cropland and support sustainable grazing include:

- Strengthen the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP): CRP provides voluntary incentives for producers to convert environmentally sensitive cropland into conservation cover for 10–15 years. Grassland CRP, a subprogram of CRP, helps maintain grazing operations and keep grasslands intact. There are meaningful opportunities for both to do more for grasslands and sustainable ranching. Overall, CRP needs to be reauthorized with at least 27 million acres, with future expansion directed toward high-priority grassland landscapes. In order to better support marginal land restoration for grazing, CRP should be enhanced to facilitate funding and assistance for grazing infrastructure and grazing management plans on marginal lands restored under the program, and Grassland CRP should be expanded to address conversion by offering longer contract options, improved cost share rates, and incentives for management enhancements. Congress should pass the bipartisan CRP Improvement and Flexibility Act (H.R. 5111 [Link](#)/S. 2608 [Link](#)), introduced by Senators Thune (R-SD), Klobuchar (D-MN), Moran (R-KS) and Smith (D-MN), which expands support for grazing infrastructure among other beneficial provisions.
- Create a program dedicated to marginal land restoration for grazing: Congress should pass the RANCH Act (S. 5277) [Link](#), introduced by Senators Rounds (R-SD) and Klobuchar (D-MN), which would create a 20-million acre dedicated program to restore grasslands for grazing and enable effective grazing management plans, which are essential to the productivity of both ranchers and grassland ecosystems.
- Improve coordinated enrollment between multiple programs for enhanced outcomes for restoration: USDA programs should be better coordinated so that federal investments in restoring marginal cropland result in grasslands that remain intact over the long term. For example, land restored through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) could be prioritized for enrollment in Grassland CRP, while producers with land leaving CRP could receive priority for grazing infrastructure and management assistance through EQIP. Congress and USDA should provide incentives for states to develop these coordinated approaches.
- Help producers manage the financial risk of reseeded: Restoring cropland to grass can create a two- to three-year period when producers have given up crop income, but

the new grass is not yet established enough for livestock to graze. A transition risk-management tool - such as transition insurance - could help landowners manage this temporary financial risk and make restoration a more viable option. Once established, insurance is no longer needed due to the resilience of grasslands, provided best practices such as regionally appropriate seed mixes, are followed.

3. Strengthen conservation delivery and coordination for cattle and bison grazers

Strong conservation programs depend on having knowledgeable people on the ground to help farmers, ranchers, and Tribal land managers put them into practice. USDA, states, Tribes, and conservation partners all play an essential role in providing the technical expertise needed to keep grasslands intact, improve grazing management, restore marginal cropland, and build resilience to drought and other challenges. WWF recommends strengthening this conservation workforce and improving coordination among the agencies and partners that support grassland producers:

- Strengthen USDA staff capacity to provide technical assistance: The permanent baseline funding for EQIP, Conservation Stewardship Program, Regional Conservation Partnership Program, and Agricultural Conservation Easement Program significantly increased as part of the 2025 budget reconciliation bill, extending critically needed conservation funding over the coming years. Congress should ensure USDA has the funding and staff capacity to immediately deliver this on-the-ground technical assistance to support ranchers, rural economies and grasslands.
- Support state/Tribal-federal partnership: Congress should provide block grants to states and Tribes to expand the critical partner role states and Tribes provide alongside USDA in meeting technical assistance needs of Tribal and non-Tribal ranchers.
- Improve training for technical assistance specific to grazing and grassland restoration: USDA should ensure that technical assistance provided through field offices is tailored to the needs of the regions and producers they serve, including grazing management for cattle and bison, grassland restoration, drought resilience, and invasive species management.
- Fully fund DOI Bureau of Indian Affairs—Agriculture Resource Management Plans (ARMP): Tribal lands have the highest rates of intact grasslands yet have difficulty accessing federal grasslands resources due to the unique land ownership on Indian reservations. Congress sought to partially address this by authorizing ARMPs for the BIA Rangelands office to provide the unique TA needed for Tribal nations and lands, yet ARMPs have rarely been funded. Congress should fully fund ARMPs to support Tribal grassland managers and ranchers.

4. Advance landscape-scale grassland conservation

The conversion trends highlighted in this year's Plowprint make clear that protecting grasslands requires action beyond individual properties. Landscape-scale approaches can strengthen stewardship across communities, coordi-

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nate conservation across larger areas, and support rural economies that depend on healthy, intact grasslands.

- Support state and Tribal initiatives that elevate and invest in the value and importance of grasslands: State and Tribal leadership is vital for curbing the rate of conversion we see in this year's Plowprint analysis and helping accelerate progress on grassland restoration. State officials have primary legal authority for managing resident wildlife and ecosystem health, and Native Nations manage roughly 6.3% of the Great Plains, using native science to maintain healthy prairie ecosystems. State agencies and Tribes play an essential role on the ground bridging federal funding with local private landowners, coordinating landscape-scale management across borders and tailoring non-regulatory incentives to keep grasslands intact and address woody plant encroachment. The Kansas Grasslands Issue Brief is an exciting example of state leadership elevating the importance of grasslands. More Great Plains states and Tribes should follow the model set by Kansas and develop state-led strategies that articulate the economic and ecological importance of grasslands and steps to invest in protection and restoration as a critical investment in the economic well-being of the state and its communities. [Link](#)

- Pass the bipartisan North American Grasslands Conservation Act: The North American Grasslands Conservation Act would provide resources for voluntary, incentive-based conservation of grasslands and establish a strategy for the protection, restoration, and management of grassland ecosystems across North America. The Act would create a dedicated funding mechanism for voluntary grassland conservation, restoration, and management across public, private, and Tribal lands and help to leverage federal, state, Tribal, and private investments while advancing landscape-scale conservation priorities. [Link](#)

5. Strengthen Tribal leadership in grassland stewardship and food sovereignty

Tribes are among the Great Plains' most important grassland stewards and have long histories of managing grassland ecosystems through bison-centered conservation and food systems. Native Nations manage roughly 6.3% of the Great Plains. Bison restoration supports grassland health, food sovereignty, and tribal economies by creating opportunities for ranching, processing, and sustainable food systems.

- Congress should pass the Indian Buffalo Management Act (IBMA): The IBMA would provide secure, consistent funding for Tribes and Tribal organizations that have an established buffalo herd and management program, as well as provide resources for Tribes that would like to establish new herds. (H.R. 7954) [Link](#) / (S. 3478) [Link](#)
- Congress and USDA should continue funding the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA) [Link](#) and expand Tribal control under the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) [Link](#). LFPA empowers state and Tribal governments to source local foods, while FDPIR pilots show the benefits of allowing Tribes to select their own foods—including bison—and vendors.
- Make the FDPIR self-determination program permanent: Empower Tribes to purchase their own foods under the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) and permit the use of state or Tribal inspection to meet food safety standards. Supporting buffalo reintroduction and expanding Tribal food sovereignty strengthens grasslands ecosystems, economies, health, and cultural continuity across the Great Plains.
- Fully incorporate bison: Given the value bison bring to keeping grasslands intact and healthy, and their importance to Tribal economies, food security and nutrition, USDA and DOI should ensure bison are incorporated into all grazing, conservation, meat processing, procurement, and food policies.

