

# Enhancing Voluntary Grassland Conservation Programs: Insights from Logan and Gove County Kansas Landowners

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During February through April of 2023, we conducted interviews with 14 Logan and Gove County landowners with property located within the Chalk Bluffs Generational Grassland priority area to understand their motivations, barriers, and experiences regarding grassland management and voluntary grassland conservation program participation. The questions addressed operational characteristics and goals, land use change drivers, voluntary grassland conservation program experiences, and the ideal program design.

**Summary** Based on qualitative analysis of the interviews, we recommend conservation partners create adaptive voluntary grassland conservation program frameworks responsive to market and climate fluctuations to help landowners manage risks. Programmatic adaptation would benefit from a collaborative community engagement approach. Conservation managers should pair landowners with programs that align with their goals and values – such as increasing the availability of high-quality forage, financial solvency, and enhancing habitats for wild game. Programs should empower local, trusted individuals to facilitate relationships, liaise information, facilitate buy-in, and adjust some programmatic requirements. Program availability, rules, and benefits must be more readily, clearly communicated, and accessible to landowners through a strategic, multi-modal approach.

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**Recommendations** to enhance existing voluntary grassland conservation programs and inform the design of the ideal program:

## **Create adaptive voluntary grassland conservation program frameworks that respond to market fluctuations to help landowners manage risks.**

Modify programmatic aspects of current voluntary grassland conservation programs or as part of the ideal program design, in ways such as:

- Regularly adjust direct payments with inflation and market fluctuations, ensuring payments exceed income from farming, grazing, or leasing the land
- Incentivize signing longer contracts through higher direct payments, more freedom of requirements, or step-up incentives as markers are reached (i.e. every 3 or 5 years)
- Provide the opportunity to exit a contract at set intervals or in emergency with minimal penalty
- Adjust stocking rate requirements based on the potential productivity and grassland integrity of the property being enrolled in the program, incrementally reviewing stocking rates and grassland health as contracts progress
- Offer alternative methods to disturb the grass other than burning and disking, while clarifying disking depth requirements

## **Focus on program-landowner goal alignment. Highlight how the programs can help landowners accomplish their short and long-term goals and support their values.**

First, there should be an initial exploration of landowner goals and values, then programs should be recommended and tailored to the landowner.

The aspirations and values of landowners are summarized as:

- Increasing availability of high-quality cattle forage while maintaining grasslands integrity
- Improving the financial solvency of their operation to pass it on to the next generation
- Enhancing habitat for the benefit of wild game populations (and resulting hunting)

Consider focusing on enrolling grassland owners who:

- Currently stock cattle at rates required for program enrollment
- Prefer ranching over farming; prefer grazing grass over farming forage crops
- Want to reduce the labor requirements of their operation
- Own low-productivity or difficult-to-cultivate land
- Desire grassland persistence for hunting

When landowners perceive incentives will impact control of their land, they lose their appeal. Retaining decision-making power is essential as ranchers forecast how their choices will impact operational viability and generational succession. Balance reward and the restrictions by elevating program value to the landowner to help attract program participants now with potential to influence generational reenrollment.

### **Utilize and empower local, trusted partners to maintain relationships, liaise information, and facilitate buy-in with local landowners.**

Landowners want to be able to give and receive information from someone who knows the regional culture, agriculture, and geography. The ideal program has someone who is local, readily available, and responsive to landowners in a manner respectful of their current operational conditions. When landowners feel their situations are understood, they are more readily able to work with a partner to find solutions. Landowners want their local contact to be able to make emergency exceptions to contract requirements.

NRCS office personnel play a critical role in program enrollment, yet landowners report not receiving the assistance they need to be successful and continue program enrollment. Additional support for local NRCS staff is needed. Other partners can help NRCS by disseminating information and gathering local landowners to increase social sharing and the norm of participation in conservation programs.

Throughout the interview process, landowners often discussed relationship building through the local perspective and the need to emphasize the voices of those enrolled in the programs. To garner more local participation, leadership from within the community, community engagement strategizing, and program development should refer to the local community members to guide feasibility and fit.

### **Clearly communicate program availability, rules, and benefits through a strategic multi-modal communication approach, including in-person conversations.**

Landowners must first be made aware of program availability to be interested in enrolling. Develop program messages and materials with the audience in mind to improve accessibility and approachability. As landowners seek information, they are looking for quick access to program details through online searching or calling a conservation partner.

Means by which to communicate program availability and rules:

- Multi-modal communication strategy: Email newsletter, mailings, text messages, and in-person
  - Messages must be sent through a variety of channels, multiple times
  - In-person meetings are crucial. They could be one-on-one or in a small group with an NRCS, TNC, or partner representative, or a peer meeting to learn from each other
- List of available programs, their enrollment dates, and qualifications
- Clear summary of program requirements, followed by their nuances
- Simple list of pre-enrollment tasks to complete and what it will take to accomplish them

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