



South Dakota
**GRASSLANDS
INITIATIVE**

PARTNER UPDATES

***Stories, information & opportunities from your partners in
South Dakota Grassland Conservation***

Any SDGI Partner is encouraged to submit an article to our quarterly partner update. If you'd like to share about your organization, projects you've been doing, or events coming up, please email your article & pictures to Laura.Grass@sdconservation.net by February 19th for the spring 2024 newsletter.

DUCKS UNLIMITED



Ducks Unlimited and partners were recently awarded \$25 million from the US Department of Agriculture through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program ([RCPP](#)).

DU and RCPP partners will work with South Dakota producers to restore over 25,000 acres of grassland over five years, emphasizing working lands and rotational grazing systems.

The goal is to incentivize a voluntary, partnership-driven approach to conservation on working agricultural lands by combining environmentally beneficial practices with new revenue streams for farmers and ranchers. RCPP partners include Natural Resources Conservation Service, South Dakota Soil Health Coalition, South Dakota Grassland Coalition, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, South Dakota Department of Game, Fish & Parks, and Audubon Great Plains.

The partnership will be able to provide short-term land rental payments designed to offset financial offsets that accompany the grassland establishment period, which typically lasts 2-3 years for active grass plantings.

As a note, while the title of this project is similar to the the South Dakota Grasslands Initiative project focusing on partnership collaboration, this grant is separate work focusing on landowner support'

At Growing Resilience, we have a team of scientists, journalists and social media professionals to provide multiple platforms (website, magazine feature stories and social media) to disseminate content in the form of video, audio (podcast and radio) and written material (blogs, feature stories) that highlight soil and rangeland health and that encourage regenerative management.



GROWING RESILIENCE

A few projects that you might like to see are:

- We have just started our 'School the Professor' series of how farmers and ranchers and their observations are educating a professor (see Growing Resilience Social media outlets – FB, Instagram and X)
- Our podcast with Gabe Brown was recently released and received good response – we plan to release an interview with Rick and Liz Haney in the next few weeks. We're excited about upcoming interviews with Tate Lanz and Laura Kahler on the Grasslands Roadmap and the SD Grasslands Initiative. To get the podcasts go to www.growingresiliencesd.com/ or subscribe to the SoilHealthLabs show wherever you get your podcasts.
- We are in the home stretch of our weekly Soil Health Challenge. The challenge consists of a quick multiple-choice question followed by a short (~1-minute video (of a rancher/farmer) that provides the answer to the question. From a poll (~100 people), it seems like this communication strategy has been more effective than newsletters, TV and radio spots or printed material. We collaborated with SDACD and SD Grassland Coalition with this activity and are (a little surprised) and pleased with the results.
- Based on the performance of this soil health challenge, we are developing a series of interactive activities that we hope we can offer to partners that would aim at increasing their profiles and educating their membership. We plan to prioritize grassroots organizations in SD that deal with livestock and ranching and hope to be reaching out to these organizations soon.



- We recently had a feature article authored by our Kurt Lawton published in Dakota Farmer on adaptive grazing that reference our podcast with Dr. Allen Williams and that features Justin Thompson's adaptive grazing journey. www.farmprogress.com/forage/rethink-grazing-practices-by-gazing-first
- We are close to the final edits of our 20-minute feature video on adaptive grazing that follow SD Ranchers Candice Mizera and fleshes this out with examples from Rancher Justin Thompson's operation

BIRD CONSERVANCY OF THE ROCKIES



The Bird Conservancy of the Rockies published an article looking at the relationship of trees on the Great Plains, available at <https://www.birdconservancy.org/to-tree-or-not-to-tree/>

The Perkins County Conservation District is excited to announce our Growing With A Purpose Speaker Program featuring Farm Succession expert Elaine Froese on January 31st, 2024 in Lemmon. We are planning a day long workshop and luncheon to reach area and local landowners, partners, and non-operating landowners to share knowledge on farm succession and the downstream effects on conservation. Day will consist of a day-long workshop presented by Elaine Froese covering farm succession planning, catered lunch, conservation awards presentation, silent auction and networking opportunities. For more information call the office at 605-244-5222 ext. 3 to reach Shauna Kopren or Maddy Hendrickson.

PERKINS COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT

NRCS



Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is a federal agency within the United States Department of Agriculture. (We were formerly known as the Soil Conservation Service or SCS). NRCS provides service in every county in South Dakota. Offices are usually located in the county seat. We are located within the USDA Service Center (look for a green sign!) along side the Farm Service Agency (formerly the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service or ASCS), and the local county conservation district. NRCS offers technical and financial assistance for free to rural and urban agricultural producers. Our offices are staffed



with technical experts experienced in conservation planning on all land uses from grassland to forest to cropland. We work one-on-one with land managers to determine what best management practices are needed for their unique operations. This could include all-things-grassland management-related from creating grazing plans to controlled burn planning, woody-encroachment management, cross-fencing, livestock water development and more! We also offer free engineering designs for installation of certain practices such as livestock pipeline, fabricated windbreaks, livestock ponds, and more!

We provide financial incentives to help offset costs of installing those practices. With the recent passage of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), NRCS's financial assistance fund pool has been increased significantly. This allows our agency to further assist land managers in meeting their conservation goals. Visit your local NRCS office to learn more! Find the NRCS Office nearest you at this link: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/contact/find-a-service-center>. Call, email, or stop-in today!

SOUTH DAKOTA AG LAND TRUST

South Dakota Ag Land Trust Receives More than \$22 Million in Grants

South Dakota's Agricultural Land Trust (SDALT) has recently been awarded two separate grants totaling nearly \$18.5 million to protect vital grassland habitat in the Northern Great Plains while also strengthening working ranchland operations and communities. These are in addition to a \$4.2 million grant awarded a year ago to help conserve working lands in the Black Hills.

SDALT received nearly \$18.3 million from the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), as part of USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service investment in advancing partner-driven solutions to conservation on agricultural land. The RCPP grant will support the perpetual protection of 8,000 acres of working ranches around the periphery of the Black Hills with minimally restrictive conservation easements. The predominately native grasslands of these protected properties will contribute tangible deliverables to NRCS climate-smart mitigation goals related to soil carbon sequestration while retaining these ranches as working lands.

A separate grant of \$173,200 from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), as part of their Northern Great Plains Program, will provide financial assistance for costs of easement transactions and further incentivize landowner easement and partner donations in South Dakota.

SDALT works on a voluntary basis with South Dakota farmers and ranchers to conserve South Dakota's agricultural heritage and working landscapes for the benefit of future generations. Founding organizations are the South Dakota Farm Bureau, South Dakota Grassland Coalition, South Dakota Cattlemen's Association, and South Dakota Association of Conservation Districts.

"We have found that interest in conservation easements in South Dakota is high, particularly in and around the Black Hills," said SDALT Executive Director Tony Leif. "Protecting working lands from residential and commercial development with easements is an essential tool for those landowners in the path of development who want to retain their productive agricultural operations into the future."

Leadership of NFWF and Bezos
Earth Fund tour the Oak Hills
Ranch in October



MILLBORN



Moving Grasslands Forward

By Kinser Madison, Sales Account Manager

Our nation's grasslands are a pivotal part of our prairie ecosystems across the heartland of the U.S. Playing roles from wildlife habitat to healthy livestock grazing, the prairie stores carbon, controls erosion, and pollination all in one. However, in the last century, millions of valuable acres of native grasslands have been lost. Adding diversity back into the landscape is imperative to help restore damaged and endangered ecosystems.

At Millborn and Renovo Seed, we are focused toward building resiliency and ensuring we are leaving the land better than we found it. Enriching land and lives is what we do every day by providing positive land use solutions paired with the right products, in the right place, at the right time. By sourcing native seed and creating pasture and prairie blends here at Millborn, we can support landowners as they work to enhance and restore grasslands and pastures in a healthy way.

Providing information, education, and a sense of urgency to implement safe practices and stop the destruction of these ecosystems is a goal we work toward every day. Every opportunity and relationship we make with landowners and the public can be a steppingstone to protect and help restore our native grasslands. By doing our part at Millborn and Renovo Seed, we can be the driving force behind implementing conservation friendly seed and practices to ensure everyone is equipped to tackle this problem head on. We work to supply seed to several organizations within the state, work with landowners as they restore their land, and help push the needle forward to enhance and restore these crucial acres of habitat.

No matter where we live, we are all dependent on the survival and health of grasslands. Whether it is from food and critical resources, carbon storage from their deep root systems which help slow the effects of climate change, or the millions of acres of food crops that are dependent on the pollination from these grasslands annually, we all depend on what they do for us and for wildlife. Millborn and Renovo Seed can help redefine land resiliency and maximize your use of these acres through our robust seed lineup and industry leading team of experts with our proven land use solutions.

The primary goal of the MMRPBA is to control cedar tree infestation and improve grassland health by conducting prescribed burns mainly in land along the Missouri River and surrounding areas. In 2023, this land-owner driven organization held six prescribed burns on over 5,000 acres in the region and later held tours of the burn sites. Those interested in learning more about their work and the organization are invited to attend the annual meeting in Burke on January 14th from 5-7:30 pm central for speakers, conversation and a meal. Learn more at www.midmissouririverpba.com



MID MISSOURI PRESCRIBED BURN ASSOCIATION





South Dakota Soil Health Coalition offers education, resources

With changing seasons and farmers wrapping up harvest and weaning livestock, South Dakota Soil Health Coalition continues its efforts to improve healthy operations! January is quickly approaching and plans for our 2024 Soil Health Conference are moving forward. This large-scale event brings leading local, regional, and international soil health experts in grassland, cropland and forestland to

SOUTH DAKOTA SOIL HEALTH COALITION

South Dakota. The two-day event will be held Jan. 23-24 in Rapid City. You can register for the conference by visiting www.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org/soil-health-conference.

SDSHC hosts an annual Soil Health School every August. This event is designed for producers as well as anyone with an interest in learning how to manage soil for resiliency and profit. The agenda features classroom style presentations by producers, experts, and researchers from across the state and region, as well as hands-on experiences in the field. Experienced producers will share their soil health challenges and successes with a class of 30-40 participants. Early registration is highly encouraged. Learn more at www.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org.

SDSHC continues to visit South Dakota schools, educating students about the importance of healthy soil in our communities, working with partner organizations to host informational events, and provide resources to producers. The recently launched Growing Connections app provides a social platform for producers to connect with trusted mentors and like-minded individuals to share ideas and experiences! Growing Connections can be found in the Apple App Store, the Google Play Store, or online at www.growingconnectionsapp.com. SDSHC has also created the South Dakota Grazing Exchange, a map-based platform for livestock producers and landowners to connect on potential grazing opportunities. Register at www.sdgrazingexchange.com.

SDSHC continues to offer cost share to producers through the Soil Health Planning and Improvement Project, helping implement practices such as grass seedings, pollinator plantings, cover crops, forage plantings, and fence and livestock watering tank installations across the state. More information on the project can be found at www.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org/319-program.

The Coalition has several resources available for partners. The South Dakota Healthy Soils Handbook is your guide to soil health principles, practices, and options for operators. Containing a vast amount of information on not only soil health, but also grassland and grazing management, this book is an excellent resource for producers of all kinds. You can read and download the entire book by visiting www.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org/sd-healthy-soils-handbook. For hard copies or to learn about other resources available please contact SDSHC at 605-280-4190 or sdsoilhealth@gmail.com.

Biologist Introduction & Public Lands Restoration Project

I serve as a Farm Bill Biologist with Pheasants Forever operating in the Southeast of the state where I primarily cover Bon Homme, Charles Mix, Hutchinson, and Yankton counties. As Farm Bill Biologists we are based out of the USDA offices where we work alongside the NRCS on Farm Bill related programs such as CRP and EQIP. We serve as a primary point of contact regarding wildlife habitat implementation and enhancements while acting as a guide through the myriad of programs available to the landowner.



PHEASANTS FOREVER, FARM BILL BIOLOGIST



While I've been employed, I have attended various meetings and events that touch on different topics and areas that we could improve upon for the betterment of the landowner. At one of these meetings a common theme was that the public lands could benefit from additional management that is currently unable to be completed. Completing that management would create an opportunity for improved wildlife habitat across a shared resource.

The solution I came up with was to utilize our local Pheasants Forever Chapter. The Pheasants Forever Chapters are groups of local people that have a particular concern and desire to see wildlife and outdoor recreation remain a culturally significant staple of these lands. I recognized that these local groups are perfectly poised to fill this missing piece of the puzzle. This being the case, I put together a novel plan that involved the signing of Special Use Permits to allow the locals access to assist the Fish and Wildlife Services with managing these underserved areas. On top of that, I am pushing forward the idea to establish a living plan to serve as a guide to prevent Waterfowl Production Areas and other undermanaged public assets from degradation to maintain high quality wildlife habitat on the landscape.

This project idea serves to demonstrate, that with a little bit of collaborative effort we have the ability to positively impact habitat locally even if the land isn't necessarily owned by us. As this idea expands, we plan on tying in fundraising events through the local chapter, habitat management workshops, and additional education with youth. I can serve as the primary point of contact for any questions regarding this project and help with any other habitat related questions people may have.

Tyler Rafter

Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologist

Email: trafter@pheasantsforever.org Cell: 641-344-5570

NEWS FROM SOUTH DAKOTA GRASSLANDS INITIATIVE

QUARTERLY PARTNER MEETINGS

Tuesday, January 16th: Wall, SD. 1-4 pm mountain.
Wednesday January 17th: Chamberlain, SD. 1-4 pm central.
Thursday, January 18th: Aberdeen, SD. 1-4 pm central.
Friday, January 19th: Brookings, SD. 9:30 am -12:30 pm
Please RSVP to Laura.Grass@sdconservation.net for one of these sessions by Thursday, January 11th.

Our first quarterly partner meeting, held in October, allowed for an introduction to the Grasslands Initiative & Central grasslands roadmap, as well as time to learn about partner's work around the state. If you missed it, a recording is available at <https://youtu.be/2kt625Kd9C4>

In January, there will be four meetings (each with the same agenda) held at four locations around the state, allowing you the opportunity to meet those geographically near you, and delve into conversations on how South Dakota can be building off themes of the [Grasslands Roadmap](#) for our state's grasslands. The ideas and themes developed from these regional meetings will be built off of during the action planning at the SD Grassland Summit. Virtual attendance is also an option for those unable to travel. Please share this invite with anyone who is connected to the grasslands, be that for work, recreation, or as a landowner.

We also hope to see you at the South Dakota Grassland Summit, taking place March 18th-19th in Oacoma, SD. This event is designed for partner agencies & organizations, individuals, land owners, land managers, and agriculture lenders. We will hear from inspiring speakers as they share about the status of grasslands. Watch your email for more details, and visit our website for a final schedule and registration as they become available.

If you'd be interested in joining the committee for putting on the summit, please email Laura.grass@sdconservation.net

SOUTH DAKOTA GRASSLANDS SUMMIT

SDGI WEBSITE & CALENDAR

If you haven't already, please take some time to explore the SDGI website, at www.SDGrassInitiative.org. On the website you can learn more about what SDGI is, sign up to be a formal partner, and view the calendar of upcoming events. The SDGI Calendar is intended to be a cumulative spot to display all upcoming events, to help promote and to help others with scheduling their own projects. To submit your event, please provide your event name, details and the key contact.

NEWS FROM SOUTH DAKOTA GRASSLANDS INITIATIVE

The Grasslands Initiative is filled with an array of partners, and we want to assure you are familiar with each, as well as have the opportunity to share about your work.

We invite you to subscribe to our podcast, Partners on the Prairie, available on Apple, Amazon, and Spotify Podcasts, as well as on our website under the resources tab and on YouTube.

Each podcast is about 25 minutes in length, designed to be a bite sized introduction to the various partners helping with South Dakota's grasslands.

PARTNERS ON THE PRAIRIE PODCAST

Currently, podcasts are published hearing from Presentation Sisters, NRCS and Northern Prairie Ag Land Trust with several more scheduled for publication this month.

We also invite you to share about your work through a podcast. If you'd be interested, please fill out [this form](https://forms.gle/h9ysosmWrvzUtcyh6) (<https://forms.gle/h9ysosmWrvzUtcyh6>) to set it up. Prior to the interview, we will plan for the direction of conversation and the schedule a time for a recorded zoom call to record the podcast. Podcasts are edited and available for you to review prior to publication.

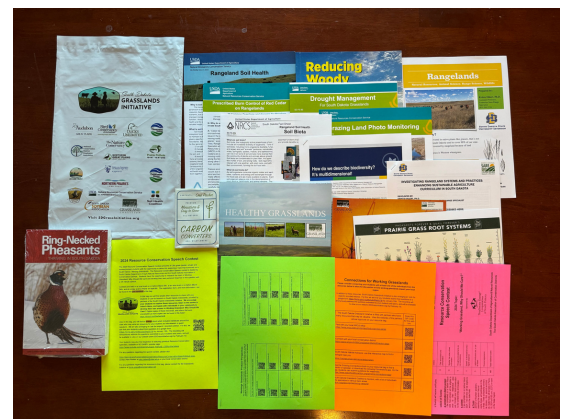


WORKING GRASSLANDS: WHY SHOULD WE CARE



The 2024 Resource Conservation Speech Contest presents 9-12th grade (public, private and homeschooled) students with the opportunity to delve into exploring a topic that surrounds us in South Dakota: Working Grasslands. The Resource Conservation Speech contest is hosted by South Dakota Department of Ag & Natural Resources and the South Dakota Association of Conservation Districts. The 2024 theme gives students the opportunity to research the topic of

Grassland: Why Should We Care. Working students develop their own personal response to this question with a 4-6 minute speech. SDGI Partners Collaborated to develop resource bags that teachers, parents & educators can request to help 9-12 grade students find the direction they'd like to respond to the prompt with. Individuals may request a free bag by emailing Randi.Papka@usda.gov. Partners are encouraged to request bags and personally deliver to educators/ students in their area.



NEWS FROM SOUTH DAKOTA GRASSLANDS INITIATIVE

SD WOODY ENCROACHMENT SUMMIT-REVISITED

Around the state, there is much conversation and activity regarding how to address woody encroachment. To assure those who are interested in the topic are able to hear about work happening in the state, we are having a zoom call from 9-11 central on Friday, December 15th via zoom. This call will also provide the opportunity to look back at notes from the December 2022 South Dakota woody encroachment summit, and discuss which of the activities and opportunities are moving forward around the state.

We do ask that you register ahead of time at

<https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZEkd-2trD8qHd34h4eCvin00iAKvw06crgR> to allow us to email out materials from the 2022 summit to participants for optional review prior to the call.

Throughout this newsletter, the term partner has been frequently used. In regards to the Grasslands Initiative, a partner may be an organization, agency, business, or association, or may be an individual representing themselves. Through participation with SDGI, partners can increase their own knowledge, gain support for work they are doing that relates to SDGI's mission, and find ways they can collaborate with others for a greater impact.

Any individual who supports the mission, vision and core values of SDGI is welcome to participate as a partner. An organization, agency, business or association which wishes to be listed as a formal partner is asked to complete [this form](#) to assure SDGI has accurate contact information and logo graphic. An individual, organization, agency, business or association may lose its status as a SDGI partner if they engage in behavior contradictory to the mission, vision or core values of SDGI, as determined by a majority of the steering committee.

SDGI PARTNERS & FORMAL PARTNERS

The South Dakota Grassland Initiative seeks to promote South Dakota grasslands, through elevating public awareness and supporting those who want to make an impact, for the benefit of current and future generations.