



2023 FARM BILL RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview: What are Rangelands and Why Are They Vital for America?

Rangelands are dominated by native vegetation and include grasslands, shrublands, woodlands, and wetlands. Rangelands comprise 40% (770 million acres) of the coterminous U.S. land area, primarily in the 17 western states, and are held in both public and private ownership. These vast landscapes provide diverse functions for our society; such benefits can be referred to as ecosystem services. Beef cattle production is currently the dominant provisioning service, but biodiversity conservation, watershed protection, carbon storage for climate regulation, and recreational/cultural attributes are also very important. Accelerating climatic and societal changes are impacting the ability of rangelands to supply ecosystem services; this includes challenges such as increasing climate variability, wildfire management, invasive species control, and rangeland conversion to ex-urban development and high-risk croplands. Declines in ecosystem services from rangelands will have major socioeconomic and environmental consequences for our nation.

The Society for Range Management (SRM) was established in 1947 to serve as the primary entity to generate science-based information in support of the sustainable use of rangelands.¹ Such information is then targeted for educational and outreach programs to positively affect management application. The SRM also aspires to inform and promote policies that allocate resources and help direct initiatives deemed critical for the national interest. The SRM thus offers recommendations in support of the 2023 Farm Bill according to the following categories:

- Conservation programs and policy development
- Innovative rangeland science and technology
- Education, outreach, training, and policy development
- Federal agency staffing, and federal program updating

¹<https://rangelands.org/>

Recommendation Requests from SRM: Farm Bill 2023

Rangelands comprise an area several times larger than croplands, yet rangelands are often overlooked or are only addressed in broad agricultural programs and policies. This represents a disservice to rangelands because they are managed with ecological, rather than agronomic principles, and they provide very different ecosystem services than those of croplands. The unique contributions of rangelands are of importance to diverse stakeholder groups that possess substantial political and socioeconomic influence. This critical distinction between rangelands and croplands requires explicit consideration in current Farm Bill negotiations.

Conservation Programs and Policy Development

The USDA already manages programs concerning voluntary conservation programs, with the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) representing the most important ones. *The SRM requests that foundational language pertaining to EQIP, CSP, and conservation easement actions should be amended to explicitly recognize “rangeland resources,” and incorporate grazing management and prescribed fire as primary supported practices.*

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) promotes public-private partnerships to expand the reach of USDA’s conservation programs. *The SRM requests that the RCPP be amended to recognize the unique aspects of rangeland management as achieved via Ecological Site Descriptions and Rangeland Health Assessments.*

Agricultural lands in general are under threat of permanent conversion to alternative land uses across the USA. Ex-urban development is a prominent threat. Municipalities, counties, and states are urgently seeking funds to help establish rangeland landscapes as conservation easements via land trusts. Local funds to set up land trusts can be generated via taxes and private donations, but match is needed. One source of federal match has been the McAllister Critical Land Conservation Program. *The SRM requests that funding for the McAllister program (or similar options) be markedly increased.*

Sustainable grazing management, as well as the use of prescribed burning,² are essential long-term management practices on rangelands. *The SRM requests that payments should be made to land managers to implement either practice over a minimum of 5 years in support of ecosystem services.*

² <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/prescribed-fire>

Innovative Rangeland Science and Technology

The SRM requests support for the development and implementation of new technologies such as virtual fencing,³ remote sensing applications, and software tools to help monitor grazing management systems.

The SRM requests support for improving planning tools including developing and refining Ecological Site descriptions (ESDs) and soil surveys.⁴ While progress has been made on these topics, gaps remain. Accurate, up-dated information on soil characteristics, ecological potentials, and management responses on rangelands is essential to better inform natural resource management planning based on sound science.

Education, Outreach, Training, and Policy Development

The SRM requests that more support is needed to boost training for professional advisors and land managers in the application of Ecological Site Descriptions⁵ and Rangeland Health Assessments.⁶ These tools are science-based methods that help in the selection of actions that allow for the sustainable management and conservation of rangeland resources, with emphasis on the diverse ecosystem services supplied.

More broadly, resources are needed to restore professional expertise among staff of federal agencies with respect to applied research and management application in rangeland systems. Professional organizations such as SRM can play a vital role by providing online and in-person forums where rangeland professionals can network and participate in training opportunities. *The SRM requests that more support be given to promote investments that foster professional growth and development within the federal workforce by encouraging employees to regularly participate in professional societies, attend annual meetings, enroll in periodic trainings, and pursue specialized certifications.*

The SRM fully supports the use of prescribed fire as a critical management practice on rangelands. To this end, *the SRM requests that more support be directed at applied research, training, and application of prescribed fire via federal agency programs.* This support would be targeted towards: (1) Development of landowner-led burning associations; (2) acquisition and availability of technical equipment to stakeholders who implement prescribed-fire events; and (3) enhancement of fire-related education opportunities for all stakeholders, whether this involves universities, Cooperative Extension, or non-governmental organizations.

³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1550742422000720>

⁴ Society for Range Management letter to Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture, July 11, 2019.

https://rangelands.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/SRM-Letter-to-the-Secretary-of-Agriculture-and-Secretary-of-Interior_ESDs-and-Soils-FINAL.pdf

⁵ <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/getting-assistance/technical-assistance/ecological-sciences/ecological-site-descriptions>

⁶ <https://repository.arizona.edu/handle/10150/643703>

As with the national farming community, the national community of ranchers is steadily growing older. Such agedness has negative implications for producer innovation, risk tolerance, and sustained delivery of ecosystem services from rangelands. Replacing the older generation with younger people via intergenerational transfer programs that help overcome barriers is vital.⁷ In addition, some inter-generational transfer gaps may best be filled by recruiting from a growing array of ethnic minorities. *The SRM requests that more investment of federal resources be targeted towards programs that foster: (1) Intergenerational transfer of ranching operations; and (2) increased ethnic diversity among emergent ranching populations. Such programs can be conducted in partnership with existing local, state, and federal initiatives.*

Ranching in the coming decades will increasingly look different from ranching of the past. One aspect of this change will be the need to diversify income streams of ranchers to embrace a wider array of products or outputs beyond beef to promote the sustainability of ranch-based livelihoods. Ecosystem service payments, whether for carbon storage, water harvesting, wind energy, or biodiversity conservation may emerge as markets develop.⁸ An important question is to what extent ecosystem service payments may supplant livestock-based revenue, especially if recurrent droughts become the new reality in terms of the production environment. What policy incentives are required to facilitate such major transitions? Are land trusts one means to spur innovation? *The SRM thus requests that more federal resources are targeted towards the support of interdisciplinary research programs that address such far-reaching questions.*

Federal Agency Staffing and Federal Program Updating

Adequate staffing of federal agencies continues to be the top challenge that land managers face when considering implementing federal conservation programs. *The SRM requests that more federal support be targeted towards such agencies to better address vacancies via recruitment and retention, especially those efforts targeting historically underserved areas.*

The SRM supports recent land and livestock management innovations where traditional regulatory frameworks on public lands have been modified to promote more flexibility and collaborative actions among grazing permittees that benefit resource use efficiency across allotments and allow for better economies of scale.⁹ Similarly, a re-envisioning of resource allocation on public lands can facilitate community-level risk management during recurrent droughts.¹⁰ Stakeholder-driven initiatives can create innovation in multiple-use settings where pressure on common resources is alleviated. In sum, *the SRM requests that more agency resources be targeted in support of advocating for more creativity and flexibility in resource-use*

⁷ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1550742420300841>

⁸ <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsufs.2021.554373/full>

⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1EGO_tEpy8

¹⁰ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1550742420300841>

planning and adherence to increase resilience in rangeland systems that are confronting uncertainty.

Conclusion

In summary, it is essential that the Nation's working rangelands remain intact to provide society with diverse and highly valued ecosystem services that compliment those provided by croplands and forests. Rangelands hold a prominent position in American culture and the Nation's identity. Increasing the profile of rangelands in the context of the Farm Bill 2023 is therefore a very important step in this process.

SUMMARY OF SRM RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *The SRM requests that foundational language pertaining to EQIP, CSP, and conservation easement actions should be amended to explicitly recognize “rangeland resources,” and incorporate grazing management and prescribed fire as primary supported practices.*
2. *The SRM requests that the RCPP be amended to recognize the unique aspects of rangeland management as achieved via Ecological Site Descriptions and Rangeland Health Assessments.*
3. *The SRM requests that funding for the McAllister program (or similar options) be markedly increased.*
4. *The SRM requests that payments should be made to land managers to implement either practice over a minimum of 5 years in support of ecosystem services.*
5. *The SRM requests support for the development and implementation of new technologies such as virtual fencing, remote sensing applications, and software tools to help monitor grazing management systems.*
6. *The SRM requests support for improving planning tools including developing and refining Ecological Site descriptions (ESDs) and soil surveys.*
7. *The SRM requests that more support is needed to boost training for professional advisors and land managers in the application of Ecological Site Descriptions and Rangeland Health Assessments.*
8. *The SRM requests that more support be given to promote investments that foster professional growth and development within the federal workforce by encouraging employees to regularly participate in professional societies, attend annual meetings, enroll in periodic trainings, and pursue specialized certifications.*
9. *The SRM requests that more support be directed at applied research, training, and application of prescribed fire via federal agency programs.*
10. *The SRM requests that more investment of federal resources be targeted towards programs that foster: (1) Intergenerational transfer of ranching operations; and (2) increased ethnic diversity among emergent ranching populations. Such programs can be conducted in partnership with existing local, state, and federal initiatives.*
11. *The SRM requests that more federal resources are targeted towards the support of interdisciplinary research programs that address such far-reaching questions.*
12. *The SRM requests that more federal support be targeted towards such agencies to better address vacancies via recruitment and retention, especially those efforts targeting historically underserved areas.*
13. *The SRM requests that more agency resources be targeted in support of advocating for more creativity and flexibility in resource-use planning and adherence to increase resilience in rangeland systems that are confronting uncertainty.*