

# Montana Declining Grassland Birds SAFE

State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE)



## Overview

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, in addition to several other conservation organizations, are partners in implementing a State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) project to enroll agricultural land found in 19 counties within the Northern Great Plains and Prairie Pothole regions of eastern Montana. The purpose of the Montana Declining Grassland Birds SAFE is to restore breeding and brood rearing habitat for several grassland dependent bird species that have suffered significant population declines.

## Background

SAFE is part of the USDA Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). CRP is a federally funded voluntary program that contracts with landowners and agricultural producers to establish and manage vegetative covers that control soil erosion, improve water quality, and provide wildlife habitat.

SAFE is a unique type of CRP that offers organizations the opportunity to partner with the USDA to establish habitat for high-priority wildlife species on agricultural land. SAFE sponsors work with the USDA to identify the wildlife species, the vegetative cover that provides habitat for the target species, and the location in the state where the habitat is needed. A partnership is formed between the SAFE sponsor and the USDA, and federal funds are made available to allow for CRP enrollment on eligible land within the SAFE project location.

## Target Wildlife Species

The goal of the Montana Declining Grassland Birds SAFE project is to provide habitat for the chestnut-collared longspur, Baird's sparrow, Sprague's pipit, and lark bunting. All four species breed in the northern plains and prairies of the US and Canada and winter in the southwestern US and Mexico. Chestnut-collared longspurs prefer shortgrass/mixed grass prairie and respond well to cover disturbance. Baird's sparrow has a lower tolerance for cover disturbance and prefers taller mixed grass prairie.

Sprague's pipit is typically found in mixed grass prairie with light to moderate grazing. Lark buntings also occupy this type of habitat but can also be found in drier, less productive shrub-steppe areas. All four species have exhibited long-term population declines.

## Habitat

Landowners and agricultural producers participating in the Montana Declining Grassland Birds SAFE are required to develop a conservation plan with assistance from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) or a technical service provider. The conservation plan will provide details on how to plant, establish, and manage habitat for chestnut-collared longspur, Baird's sparrow, Sprague's pipit, and lark bunting. Each species has slightly different habitat requirements, primarily related to cover structure and subsequent management once the cover is established. The cover being established is usually a diverse mixture of native grasses and forbs, and in some cases shrubs, providing essential habitat for the targeted species. After the habitat is established, it will need to be maintained and managed by grazing, preferably, or by prescribed burning. Proper habitat establishment, maintenance, and management will maximize benefits for chestnut-collared longspur, Baird's sparrow, Sprague's pipit, and lark bunting.



Photo by National Audubon Society

## Project Location

The Montana Declining Grassland Birds SAFE project is located in portions of Big Horn, Blaine, Carbon, Daniels, Fergus, Garfield, Golden Valley, McCone, Musselshell, Petroleum, Phillips, Roosevelt, Rosebud, Stillwater, Sweet Grass, Treasure, Valley, Wheatland, and Yellowstone counties.

## Eligible CRP Practices

This SAFE project uses the following CRP practices:

- ◆ CP38E-2 Permanent Native Grasses and Legumes, includes the establishment of at least 4 native grasses, with one being a native warm season grass, and 3 forbs, one of which must be a native legume.
- ◆ CP38E-4D Permanent Wildlife Habitat, includes a minimum cover mix similar to the CP38E-2.
- ◆ CP38E-25 Rare and Declining Habitat, includes the establishment of at least 6 native grasses with one being a warm season grass, and 5 forbs, including one native legume, and 1 shrub species.

## Haying and Grazing

Emergency and non-emergency grazing is allowed. New seedings are to be protected from grazing and left idle for the first 2–3 years. Grazing is the preferred management activity. As a management activity, grazing is required once

every two to three years. In lieu of grazing, prescribed burning is also an authorized management activity, required at least once during the contract.

Emergency or non-emergency haying is not authorized. Haying or clipping as a management activity is prohibited.

## Eligibility Requirements

Because SAFE is part of CRP, certain land and participant eligibility rules apply. To begin with, land must be in the project area and meet cropping history. CRP participant eligibility rules also apply to SAFE.

## Payments and Incentives

In exchange for participation in CRP SAFE, the Farm Service Agency (FSA) provides participants with annual per acre rental payments, cost-share to assist with habitat establishment expenses, and in some cases additional monetary incentives.

## For More Information

This fact sheet is provided for informational purposes only; other restrictions or requirements may apply. Consult your local FSA office for details. For more information, contact your local service center and USDA Farm Service Agency office: [farmers.gov/service-locator](https://farmers.gov/service-locator).



