USDA Expands Migratory Big Game Pilot in Wyoming to Broader Landscape Initiative, Expanding Next to Idaho and Montana

News Release | Wyoming | November 07, 2023

Wyoming

CASPER, Wyo., Nov 07, 2023 - The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is expanding its partnership to support the voluntary conservation of private working lands and migratory big game populations from the state of Wyoming to also include Idaho and Montana. USDA's Migratory Big Game Initiative also provides a new package of investments in key conservation programs for fiscal year 2024, which includes funding to support increased staffing capacity and the deployment of streamlined program application processes for agricultural producers and landowners. Producers in Wyoming, Idaho and Montana will be able to apply for conservation programs offered by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA) that meet their unique needs starting this fall.

"We're pleased to announce the expansion of this initiative," said NRCS State Conservationist Jackie Byam. "It will help create new and enhanced opportunities through USDA's conservation programs to keep working lands working and give farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners new opportunities to conserve wildlife and migration corridors."

"Using lessons learned from a partnership pilot with the state of Wyoming, USDA is scaling up this model across the West as part of President Biden's commitment to support voluntary, locally led, producer-driven conservation efforts," said William Bunce, FSA State Executive Director in Wyoming.

Package of Opportunities for Producers

USDA will offer producers a package of opportunities they can choose from to meet their operations' unique needs. Programs include the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and Grassland Conservation Reserve Program (Grassland CRP) and will be available across a wide range of lands including grasslands, shrublands, and forested habitats located on tribal and privately owned working lands.

ACEP helps producers who want to protect sensitive landscapes and prime farmlands from conversion to non-compatible land uses such as residential subdivision through establishment of long-term conservation easements. EQIP focuses on integrating practices on working lands, such as prescribed grazing systems.

These programs will complement the Grassland CRP program, which helps producers and landowners maintain and protect grasslands while still enabling haying and grazing activities to continue.

NRCS accepts applications year-round for EQIP and CSP. Interested producers should contact the NRCS at their local USDA Service Center. FSA will announce signup dates for Grassland CRP in the future.

Climate-Smart Activities

The Migratory Big Game Initiative advances USDA's efforts in climate-smart agriculture, and it's funding is bolstered by the Inflation Reduction Act. Recently, NRCS expanded the Climate-Smart Agriculture and Forestry Mitigation Activities that qualify for funding through the Inflation Reduction Act, and several of those are critical to this initiative, including brush management, prescribed burning and herbaceous weed treatment.

Building on the Success in Wyoming

The Wyoming pilot for this initiative was first announced in May 2022. The initiative leverages and compliments other ongoing conservation efforts on working lands such as those conducted under the Working Lands for Wildlife's (WLFW) Framework for Conservation Action in the Great Plains Grasslands and Sagebrush Biome, unveiled in 2021 by USDA. Both efforts emphasize a commitment to voluntary, incentive-based approaches; identifies and elevates the critical role of private, working lands; and stresses the importance of supporting state, tribal, and landowners to advance their conservation priorities. The initiative also further focuses FSA's commitment to assisting producers in protecting and maintaining grasslands through grazing and for supporting plant and animal biodiversity within National Priority Zones.

Accomplishments so far include:

- A $11 million EQIP investment resulted in 97 new contracts that conserved 307,713 acres. Primary practices were obstruction removal, fence and herbaceous weed treatment. These practices were used to remove unnecessary and/or non-wildlife friendly fencing, replace with new wildlife friendly fencing and to treat invasive annual grasses degrading otherwise healthy sagebrush rangelands, primarily cheatgrass.

- A $10 million ACEP investment provided funding for 17 conservation easements that perpetually maintain 11,830 acres of working lands as open space available to migrating wildlife and prohibit conversion to non-compatible land uses like housing subdivisions.

- NRCS hired 2 Rangeland Management Specialists and are currently in the process of hiring a Big Game Coordinator and 2 Area Biologists specifically tasked with helping to deliver the program. FSA hired additional staff in Wyoming to help increase program awareness and producer interest.
- Ranchers in Wyoming responded to Grassland CRP opportunities in 2023 by increasing the number of offers in the signup by 30% when compared to the signup in 2022. Twenty-five percent of signup in 2023 accepted offers in Wyoming are in the big game corridor priority area which is up from 10% in signup in 2022.
- Grasslands CRP enrollment increased within big game priority areas:
    - Over 147,000 acres accepted statewide (2023), 25% in priority area (over 37,000 acres)
    - Over 135,000 acres accepted statewide (2022), 11% in priority area (over 14,000 acre)
    - Over 186,000 acres accepted statewide (2021), 10% in priority area (over 19,000 acres)
    - Over 75,000 acres accepted statewide (2020), 2% in priority area (1,700 acres)
    - Within the priority area, Grassland CRP participants are offered:
        - A cost share for grazing infrastructure such as interior fence and watering systems
        - A higher minimum annual rental rate of $18 per acre per year, compared to $13 for participants outside of the priority area
- NRCS provided $300,000 to the University of Wyoming (through Dr. Jerod Merkle, Assistant Professor, Department of Zoology and Physiology) to provide dedicated technical and science support, which is specifically directed to NRCS Wyoming, Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD), and other partners related to this pilot project.
- Through a $500,000 grant, FSA is partnering with the University of Wyoming's Haub School of Natural Resources and Environment to explore the potential for the Grassland Conservation Reserve Program to help conserve ungulate migration corridors in the West. Objectives of this project are to evaluate the current delivery of Grassland CRP and identify potential improvements with respect to social and ecological outcomes.
- NRCS provided $100,000 through the Conservation Effects Assessment Project Agreement to evaluate wildlife friendly fence effectiveness through Dr. Derek Scasta at the University of Wyoming.
- To ensure latest science and experience was incorporated into delivery, NRCS West National Technology Support Center (WNTSC) worked with partners and led creation of a technical note for wildlife friendly fencing. The Technical Note will be released in 2024.

More Information

Under the Biden-Harris Administration, USDA is engaged in a whole-of-government effort to combat the climate crisis and conserve and

protect our nation's lands, biodiversity and natural resources including our soil, air and water. Through conservation practices and partnerships, USDA aims to enhance economic growth and create new streams of income for farmers, ranchers, producers and private foresters. Successfully meeting these challenges will require USDA and our agencies to pursue a coordinated approach alongside USDA stakeholders, including State, local and Tribal governments.

USDA touches the lives of all Americans each day in so many positive ways. Under the Biden-Harris Administration, USDA is transforming America's food system with a greater focus on more resilient local and regional food production, fairer markets for all producers, ensuring access to safe, healthy and nutritious food in all communities, building new markets and streams of income for farmers and producers using climate smart food and forestry practices, making historic investments in infrastructure and clean energy capabilities in rural America, and committing to equity across the Department by removing systemic barriers and building a workforce more representative of America. To learn more, visit usda.gov.

Farm Service Agency:

1400 Independence Ave.
SW Washington, DC 20250

Contact:

FPAC Press Desk
FPAC.BC.Press@usda.gov