

Restoring Ranchlands for Priority Birds in Eastern Montana

A Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative Proposal April 2009

Submitted by: Environmental Defense Fund
In partnership with: Ranchers Stewardship Alliance, The Nature Conservancy, and World
Wildlife Fund

Introduction

When Lewis and Clark led the Corps of Discovery across North America 200 years ago, the northern prairie seemed eternal: wildlife plentiful beyond comprehension was sustained by the rich native grasses and shrubs which were in turn shaped by the forces of fire, drought, grazing and climate. But today across the globe, prairies are among the most imperiled and least protected of all ecosystems. Less than 2% of temperate grasslands worldwide have received conservation protection and some wildlife species associated with prairies have suffered losses in both extent and numbers.

In particular, a suite of northern grassland birds that occur nowhere else in the world has suffered precipitous declines. These birds, including species such as the long-billed curlew, Sprague's pipit and mountain plover, are the unlucky national record holders for terrestrial vertebrate population declines in recent years. North American sage grouse populations have also declined and emerging threats from energy development and West Nile Virus have biologists concerned for future survival of the iconic sagebrush bird.

Montana is a stronghold for grassland and sagebrush birds. With millions of acres of untilled native lands in the eastern part of the state, Montana has enormous potential to play a pivotal role in helping reverse precipitous population declines of these birds. The fact that most of these lands are in private ownership and managed for livestock production underscores the need to work in partnership with private ranchers while maintaining the productivity of their agricultural operations.

Incentives work. Incontrovertible proof of that lies in the success of EQIP and other NRCS programs in helping producers improve agricultural practices and conservation values across many thousands of acres via one-on-one, on-the-ground projects. Expanding those efforts to even greater levels of effectiveness and scales of conservation impact requires leveraging the power of partnerships between diverse groups and landowners. In particular, critical support for collaborative conservation of prairie wildlife could come from the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI). This new program can provide a source of technical and financial assistance to help producers manage lands in ways that proactively reduce the need to list these species, and avoid any potential future regulatory requirements of the Endangered Species Act. It can also provide financial support that enables producers to enhance land stewardship while remaining financially solvent, reducing the need to sell their property to owners who may convert the land to less environmentally-friendly uses.

The Environmental Defense Fund's Center for Conservation Incentives (CCI) develops innovative approaches to conserve working landscapes through market incentives. In particular, CCI is active in promoting innovative use of Farm Bill programs to achieve specific resource objectives in targeted landscapes. The CCPI is a prime example of this work. Through this project we aim to provide support and assistance to local conservation organizations and private landowners to help demonstrate the effective use of this new program. We have been asked by Ranchers Stewardship Alliance to provide the lead role in coordinating this effort.

As a partner to EDF in this work, the Ranchers Stewardship Alliance has close ties and strong working relationships with ranchers active within this important landscape. The locally-led conservation group strives to encourage prairie stewardship in ways that also improve ranching livelihoods and promote social integrity of the landscape. Through the CCPI, EDF will spearhead a conservation effort that restores habitat for priority birds while also engaging RSA and their conservation neighbors in building closer, more productive, and longer-lasting partnerships with the private landowners of the area.

Through this initiative, EDF and its partners will implement beneficial management practices over the next five years for a suite of grassland and sagebrush birds that are priority species in the state of Montana. We request NRCS set aside \$671,190 for this cooperative conservation project, beginning in 2009. These funds will leverage significant non-federal contributions for supporting activities from partners and landowners, and together with NRCS, we will secure stewardship enhancements across at least 20,000 acres of globally important grasslands.