

Planets Coming into Alignment:

The Central Grasslands Roadmap, International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists and More ...

By Cliff Wallis, AWA Director



Alberta Wilderness Association has a long history of grassland work, serving on the Prairie Conservation Forum, the Northern Plains Conservation Network (now Great Plains Conservation Network) and the Transboundary Grassland Partnership for Saskatchewan, Alberta and Montana.

This is an exciting time for grassland

conservation as it seems the planets are coming into alignment – especially with the Central Grasslands Roadmap and the expanding international context. Globally we now have recognition of biodiversity loss and the need for more protected areas – the 30X30 process or High Ambition Coalition is part of that. Canada and Mexico have signed on to that commitment to achieve 30 percent

protection by 2030. America's President Joe Biden signed an executive order which we hope will help the USA also meet this ambitious goal.

The world's rangelands cover over half of the planet's lands and support more than 2 billion livelihoods but grasslands have been at the bottom of the list for conservation and economic priorities. That is changing. Since the Hohhot Declaration in 2008, NGOs have been working on an International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists to be held in 2026. It now has support from 75 countries, including Canada and Mexico, and three hundred organizations. At the time of writing, the final vote to approve is happening at the UN Environment Assembly in Nairobi. This will bring needed attention to the world's grasslands and hopefully new commitments and resources.

In 2020, World Wide Fund for Nature established the Global Grassland and Savannas Dialogue Platform with monthly calls. WWF has been at the forefront of grassland conservation since the late 1980s with Prairie for Tomorrow in Canada, and globally since the early 2000s when they identified temperate grasslands, including the Northern Great Plains, as one of their global conservation priorities. Over the past two years, the Platform has been busy at international meetings, including The Global Landscape Forum, World Conservation Congress, UN Food System Summit, Convention on Biodiversity and UN Commission to Combat Desertification. There are working groups doing mapping and data collection and identifying globally significant grassland and savanna areas.

Alberta's Prairie Conservation Forum and Saskatchewan's Prairie Conservation Action Plan are collaborative networks that have



been active since the late 1980s. They have increased the recognition and protection of native grasslands. More recently, those networks helped form the Transboundary Grassland Partnership, representing Indigenous peoples, governments, ranchers, and NGOs working on plains conservation in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Montana.

One of the most important recent changes for the northern plains has been the identification by Environment and Climate Change Canada of the southern part of the Canadian prairies as a priority landscape for species at risk recovery.

Exciting to me is the commitment to bison reintroduction. Indigenous Peoples started the linnii Initiative to put bison and cultural traditions back into their landscapes. In 2014, tribes and First Nations signed on to the Buffalo Treaty. It states: “we are part of the buffalo, culturally, materially and spiritually. Our ongoing relationship is so close and so embodied in us that buffalo is the essence of our holistic ecocultural life ways.” As Amethyst First Rider of the Kainai says: “buffalo make us better human beings.” It’s an exciting time with bison reintroduction happening from the Kainai lands in Alberta south through Montana, the Dakotas, and Colorado to the grasslands of northern Mexico.

With this attention to grasslands, Joint Ventures representing the Great Plains from Canada to Mexico formed the JV8 where a lot of focus is now on grassland conservation in addition to their wetlands and bird work. There is also the Trilateral Committee between Canada, the US and Mexico which coordinates continental efforts on ecosystem conservation.

Where does the Central Grasslands Roadmap fit in? The easiest answer comes from the Central Grasslands Roadmap Executive Summary:

“The Central Grasslands Roadmap is a collaborative guide to increase support for conservation of North America’s Central Grasslands, which span 500 million acres across Indigenous Lands, Canada, the United States and Mexico. By bringing together 8 diverse sectors and three countries, the Roadmap identifies common principles and shared priorities for the many people and organizations living and working on the Central Grasslands. The Roadmap will enable us to save what we have left, restore and improve what we can, and support biodiversity and

resiliency across the landscape.”

“Disparate efforts are not adding up, and measures of wildlife populations, grassland acres, human community health and sustainability are down, and continue to decline. We have to think, act and do differently, and that starts with us working together to get on the same map, agreeing to the directions we need to go that focus on what we need to do more of, what we need to know more about, and what new strategies are critical to saving our grasslands over the next ten years.”

“This roadmap enables the collaboration of 8 sectors from Canada, the U.S., and Mexico to see how we can gain traction on unified initiatives for policy and funding, how more local strategies can be connected across the Biome, and how we can share and leverage best practices, research, and funding to make scaling great work more straightforward.”

- *Indigenous Communities & First Nations*
- *Private Land Managers, Owners, Ranchers & Producers*
- *Federal Agencies*
- *Provincial & State Agencies*
- *Industry & Private Sector*
- *Academia including scientists, researchers, and universities*
- *Non-Governmental Organizations*
- *Foundations & Funders”*

The Central Grasslands Roadmap outlines three main strategy areas:

STRATEGY AREA 1: CREATE AND ENRICH STRONG PARTNERSHIPS – priorities in this area include sharing knowledge and resources across cultures and broadening communications to establish a shared understanding of the importance of grasslands.

STRATEGY AREA 2: REFINE FUNDING AND POLICY INITIATIVES – priorities include scaling up proven programs that support grassland conservation and influencing major legislation across all three countries, including the North American Grasslands Conservation Act.

STRATEGY AREA 3: FOCUS ON RESEARCH THAT IMPROVES CONSERVATION – priorities including integrating community-centred approaches and knowledge and refining core monitoring standards.

The intent of the Central Grasslands Roadmap is not to duplicate efforts but network the networks and individuals doing the on-the-ground work. AWA has expressed

its support of the Roadmap, writing:

“As an organization that works to steward and conserve a portion of the Central Grasslands biome, the Alberta Wilderness Association is committed to the vision, priorities and guidance set forth in the Central Grasslands Roadmap as outlined in its Executive Summary. We are committed to the Roadmap collaboration to ensure that our way of life and one of the most important ecosystems on the planet, remains intact.”

“The Central Grasslands are needed to support pollination, prevent erosion, and provide habitat for wildlife. Healthy grasslands also filter sediment, nutrients, and bacteria that otherwise end up in waterways, threatening fish and drinking water. Most importantly, the Central Grasslands ability to sequester carbon and help stabilize the climate is extensive, all while simultaneously producing critical food supplies and serving as the economic backbone of rural communities.”

“Our fish and wildlife, water, climate, food supply, and way of life are dependent on the collective effort laid out in the Roadmap. By working together and committing to mutually beneficial actions we can conserve essential habitat for future generations with ranchers, producers, and Indigenous communities at the center of the solutions, and provide sustainable economic opportunities where those are needed most.”

“Specifically, to help achieve the vision, we are focused on collaborating with other supporters to achieve legal protection for large tracts of native grassland in Canada while supporting the interests of the communities that depend upon them. We also continue to co-manage, with the local community, part of an extensive tract of protected native grassland in southeastern Alberta where we use prescribed grazing to achieve a variety of desired conservation outcomes while respecting local interests.”

The Central Grasslands Roadmap will hold its first in-person summit at the end of May in Fort Collins, Colorado. In the lead up to this second summit (the first was virtual), this collaborative is seeking the support of individuals and organizations across the Great Plains.

Our grasslands are wonderful places and it’s reassuring to think the planets are coming into alignment for what could be a big leap forward in grassland conservation. We are redoubling our efforts to achieve the big wins that may now be possible. 🌱