

---

## **The Central Grasslands Roadmap Summit -- Planets Coming into Alignment for Grassland Conservation**

Exciting things are happening in grassland conservation and the Central Grasslands Roadmap is helping to spread the word and coordinate actions.

The Central Grasslands Roadmap

is “a collaborative guide to increase conservation of North America’s Central Grasslands, which span 500 million acres across Indigenous Lands, Canada, the United States and Mexico.” The Roadmap brings together diverse voices involved in the grasslands and sets goals and principles for working together to protect the North American grasslands. This year’s summit provided an opportunity for sharing ideas and discussion on the priorities for grasslands conservation.

On May 24 and 25, the Central Grasslands Roadmap held its second summit and first in-person event at Colorado State University in Fort Collins. It built on the work from the first summit held virtually in the summer of 2020. Each summit brought together representatives from Mexico, Canada and the USA and across a range of different backgrounds and interests including (but not limited to) Indigenous Communities and/or First Nations, academia, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government agencies (both federal and state/provincial), industry, and landowners. Discussions centred on the newest edition of the Central Grasslands Roadmap published in April 2022.

There were inspiring speeches by Ava Hamilton and Monica Rattling Hawk on the importance of working together to preserve the planet. Monica Rattling Hawk, a citizen of the Oglala Lakota Nation, spoke of recognizing that the Indigenous Peoples have lost significant land and their relationships to the earth. There were presentations from Indigenous Peoples, NGOs, Government, and academia describing conservation projects, strategies and implementation approaches for the North American Great Plains. Topics ranged from woody encroachment, soils, water, insects, loss of grasslands to the plough, endangered species, and mapping for conservation.

There were dedicated sessions for people living on, and drawing sustenance from, the land. Ranchers identified impediments to grassland conservation but provided their views

on pathways to success. Tribes and First Nations opened up about their history and the profound impacts of colonialism on their ways of life. They looked forward to different futures with initiatives like Innii and the Buffalo Treaty which are returning bison to the plains from Canada to Mexico.

A virtual summit was held simultaneously to allow participants unable to travel to participate in portions of the summit. Virtual summit participants were able to view the opening and closing events through a live broadcast, and participate in online discussion groups. There were opportunities to interact in person and virtually. Some chose to simply add their ideas to a shared online board, while others entered more heated debates. There were honest conversations covering a broad range of topics but there was a much needed and heavy emphasis on people living on the land, particularly Indigenous Peoples.

The summit helped to clarify and affirm the Central Grasslands Roadmap actions, and though the event was not able to solve all the issues around grasslands conservation, it succeeded in bringing the different parts of society together to openly discuss conflicts and share ideas on how best to proceed. Many questions remain, though some big ideas and priorities started to emerge including:

- The potential role of an existing organizational pathway for grassland conservation with the JV8 (eight of the Joint Ventures working on bird conservation and associated habitat protection from northern Mexico to southern Canada);
- Support for the efforts to reintroduce bison back into the plains, with an emphasis on the work of many Indigenous Peoples across the Great Plains;
- Excitement about the possibility of new tools and resourcing for grassland conservation at all scales through a *North American Grasslands Conservation Act* (NAGCA);
- Conceiving the Roadmap as a Collaborative of Collaboratives,

encompassing other groups (e.g. Transboundary Grassland Partnership, Great Plains Conservation Network, Prairie Conservation Forum, Prairie Conservation Action Plan, Rangelands Gateway, Intertribal Buffalo Council); and

- Expansion of efforts by funders from the current focus on the Northern Great Plains to also include the Southern Great Plains.

The role of Indigenous Peoples was acknowledged as important but a much deeper and different discussion is needed. There was disappointment from Indigenous Peoples that they were merely classified as another “sector.” It is important that a separate space and resourcing be made available to allow Indigenous Peoples to set their own path, define their priorities for grassland conservation and how they want to integrate/interact with the Central Grasslands Roadmap and other participants.

Despite some conflicting views and outstanding issues, the overall tone of the summit was positive and very energizing. The planets do seem to be coming into alignment for grasslands conservation across the Great Plains of North America.

For more information, see [grasslandsroadmap.org](https://grasslandsroadmap.org).

- By Cliff Wallis and Ruiping Luo