



# GRASSLANDS KEYSTONE INITIATIVE PROTECTING AN INTEGRAL ECOSYSTEM



The Central Grasslands, also known as the Great Plains, are one of North America's largest and most vital ecosystems. Home to hundreds of plant and animal species, this landscape is essential not only for wildlife and their habitats, but also to the people and communities who live, work and thrive in these areas.

Grasslands support essential pollinators like bees and butterflies and provide critical habitat for a variety of birds. In addition to helping produce food that supports people around the world, this ecosystem plays a critical role in bolstering climate resiliency, including by sequestering carbon, reducing soil erosion, ensuring clean water, and protecting biodiversity. Since time immemorial, grassland systems have also been integral for Indigenous communities, many of which relied on bison that once thrived across the Great Plains.

Yet despite their outsized importance in providing ecosystem-wide benefits, grasslands are being lost at a far faster pace than they are being conserved. In the last 10 years alone, we have lost more than 50 million acres of grasslands. Habitat loss from factors such as woody plant encroachment, agricultural conversion, and invasive species threaten the health of grasslands and risk a biome-scale collapse that would be catastrophic for fish and wildlife, people and their communities, our food sources, and the environment as a whole. The imperative to preserve this ecosystem is made even more urgent by the impacts of climate change, including warming temperatures, historic droughts, and intense wildfires.

To address these urgent threats, as part of the Department of the Interior's [Restoration and Resilience Framework](#) funded by President Biden's Investing in America agenda, the Department's bureaus and offices are working to protect, conserve and restore the Central Grasslands. The Department is utilizing funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act to support grasslands conservation, solve key conservation challenges, and advance climate resiliency.

As part of these efforts, we are working collaboratively with farmers and ranchers, state and local leaders, Tribal Nations, the outdoor recreation community, private landowners, and other stakeholders to conserve North America's Central Grasslands for the people, wildlife, and economies they support. For example, the Department has [supported](#) the Central Grasslands Roadmap, an effort to engage multiple nations across three countries and eight diverse sectors to identify a shared vision, common principles, and collaborative priorities for grasslands conservation and Tribal co-stewardship. These locally led efforts also help advance the Biden-Harris administration's [America the Beautiful initiative](#), a nationwide effort to conserve, connect, and restore the lands, waters, and wildlife upon which we all depend.

## THE GRASSLANDS RESTORATION KEYSTONE INITIATIVE INVESTS IN:



### Restoring Bison Populations

American bison are America's national mammal and once numbered 60 million in North America. Many Indigenous cultures developed strong ties with bison, or buffalo, and relied upon them for sustenance, shelter, and cultural and religious practices. By 1889, due to uncontrolled hunting and an intentional U.S. policy of eradication, only a few hundred wild bison remained. Decades of careful conservation and restoration efforts, including from Tribal communities, have increased the number of wild bison in the United States from fewer than 500 to more than 15,000. The Department is [investing millions](#) of dollars and enhancing organizational support to advance bison restoration efforts to grasslands.



### Utilizing Indigenous Knowledge

The Grasslands Keystone Initiative centers Indigenous Knowledge in our efforts to conserve these vital ecosystems. By engaging Tribal communities, we are focused on building the relationships, trust and transparency that are essential to the success and durability of this effort, and incorporating generations of knowledge regarding Indigenous plants, animals and grasslands. Through Tribal co-stewardship, we will share knowledge, set priorities, and invest in projects that conserve and restore cultural heritage and ecosystems.



### Protecting Birds, Bees and Butterflies

Pollinators provide vital benefits to people and wildlife – keeping animals and plants that we depend on thriving while bringing us food and supporting the economy. But pollinators and grassland birds are declining precipitously as their grassland habitats disappear. By restoring soil health and increasing plant diversity, enhancing grasslands will conserve pollinators – like monarch butterflies and western bumble bees – as well as grassland birds – like America's national bird the bald eagle, Sprague's Pipits and Baird's Sparrows. Conserving our grasslands is key to protecting these species and our lands and waters, delivering natural solutions to the changing climate, and providing all Americans with access to nature and its many benefits.

