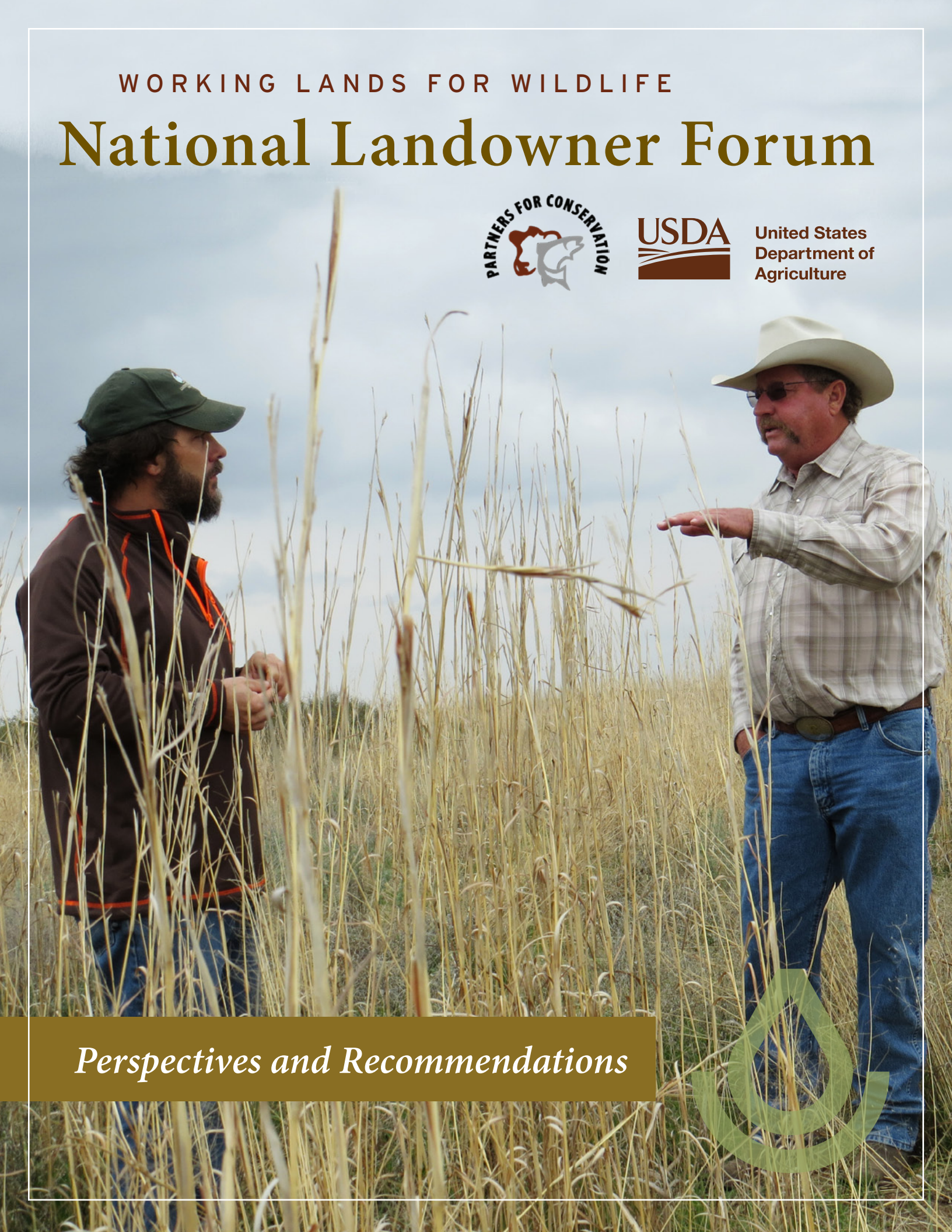
WORKING LANDS FOR WILDLIFE

National Landowner Forum

PARTNERS FOR CONSERVATION

USDA United States Department of Agriculture



Perspectives and Recommendations

Top Photo: NRCS West Regional Conservationist, Astor Boozer, welcomes the group to the Working Lands for Wildlife National Landowner Forum. Credit: Laura Jackson. Bottom photos: Priority landscapes and wildlife species are the focus of Working Lands for Wildlife. Credit: USDA NRCS.

New England Cottontail Habitat Restoration. Credit: USDA NRCS.

Executive Summary

Across the United States, more than two-thirds of the land is privately owned and often provides the most critical fish and wildlife habitat. Without private landowners leading the way for conservation of these landscapes, species can decline until populations are at risk and require extensive and often restrictive action to protect them. In recent years, an emphasis on voluntary conservation efforts on private lands has made a tremendous impact on a number of fish and wildlife species. Working collaboratively with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) through the Working Lands for Wildlife partnership, private landowners are making a difference.

In May 2016, 26 private landowners from across the country met in Denver, Colorado to talk with NRCS staff about what is working in the Working Lands for Wildlife partnership and what opportunities exist for improvement. Jointly coordinated by Partners for Conservation and NRCS, and including funding support from the Intermountain West Joint Venture, the 2-day meeting provided a forum to share stories of success and challenges in order to maximize outcomes with future opportunities.

The landowners presented a shared land ethic with a vision that effective conservation is based on finding the common ground where what's best for landowners is also what is best for the land including wildlife. Keeping working lands working is what keeps habitat in place. The key is that these efforts are voluntary, and this voluntary commitment must be based on a strong foundation of trust and credibility that is essential in building effective relationships.

An overwhelming message that resonated throughout the forum centered on the importance of effective communication. The participating landowners are already leaders in their community, offering tours of their property to communicate how conservation efforts have helped wildlife and their operation. However, they agreed that broadening communication and building strong relationships leads to effective community-based conservation.

The participants voiced strong support for the Working Lands for Wildlife approach and the need for achieving quantifiable conservation outcomes. At the end of the forum, there was overall agreement on the value of the meeting and that their input was heard and understood.

The participants had five primary recommendations for expanding and improving Working Lands for Wildlife:

- Demonstrate need and build support for increased conservation technical assistance.
- Promote effective communication with landowners, NRCS staff members, and partners regarding Working Lands for Wildlife.
- Work on tools and techniques beyond communications that will help build relationships and partnerships at the local and regional levels.
- Develop the concept of flexibility in programs, practices, relationships, and partnerships in order to advance Working Lands for Wildlife as an approach.
- Help partners to identify the overall plan and vision for a landscape or focal species that will motivate participation and foster greater accountability.

What is Working Lands for Wildlife?

Over the past five years, NRCS has prioritized working with landowners and partners to proactively address wildlife-related conservation issues at the landscape scale. Farm Bill resources are directed to work on specific landscapes where focused efforts are designed to benefit target species. This approach, known as Working Lands for Wildlife, uses a shared vision to conserve working landscapes through voluntary conservation and is supported through NRCS technical and financial assistance and through partnership contributions.

Working Lands for Wildlife provides an effective non-regulatory approach to conserving at-risk species by implementing enough of the right conservation in the right places to make a difference. By emphasizing collaboration with landowners as equal partners, trusting relationships between private landowners and NRCS allow rapid development of customized conservation plans. Dedicated Farm Bill financial assistance and partner contributions are invested to accelerate the rate of practice implementation. Resulting landscape conservation sustains both agricultural production and productive wildlife habitats.

A key component of Working Lands for Wildlife is the incorporation of science to develop tools that identify key landscapes and threats to focus efforts. These decision support tools have steered Working Lands for Wildlife investments to locations where conservation benefits could be maximized, greatly benefiting many at-risk species including the greater sage-grouse and the New England cottontail. Outcome-based evaluations then quantify the resulting outcomes so consideration for voluntary conservation can be given in decisions related to the Endangered Species Act.

Gopher tortoise burrow in a longleaf pine forest. Credit: USDA NRCS.

Strong Support of Working Lands for Wildlife

Participants in the forum strongly supported the vision and intent of Working Lands for Wildlife. Many expressed that they were not fully aware of the breadth of the approach and the variations that have been developed in different landscapes and with different species. In a follow up survey of participants, every respondent agreed (85% strongly agreed) that the Working Lands for Wildlife approach is valuable in addressing natural resource and wildlife challenges nationally and in their area. Similarly, the vast majority strongly agreed that they would be comfortable talking about Working Lands for Wildlife with their neighbors and in their broader community.

Science is a key component of Working Lands for Wildlife. Credit: USDA NRCS.

What's Good for the Bird is Good for the Herd

The Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) was the first Working Lands for Wildlife partnership where NRCS addressed an issue at a landscape scale and approached the work as an all-inclusive collaboration between landowners, state and local agencies, non-profit organizations, and more. The efforts focused on deploying targeted conservation to conserve western rangelands and utilized scientific investments to measure response and help support future investment decisions. Through the partnership, SGI has improved sage grouse habitat on more than 1,100 ranches totaling 4.4 million acres and has quantified resulting benefits to sage grouse, song birds, and mule deer. Importantly, the conservation practices used, including conifer removal and sustainable grazing practices, are not only benefitting wildlife but are also making livestock operations more sustainable.

Credit: Jeremy Roberts, Conservation Media.

Working Lands for Wildlife focuses on target species because their diverse seasonal habitat requirements and extensive home ranges are representative of healthy landscapes used by many additional species.

Working Lands for Wildlife Recipe for Success

Voluntary conservation serves as the foundation for the Working Lands for Wildlife vision. Moving forward, NRCS is looking to expand the approach to provide similar benefits to more landscapes and species across the nation. The agency has identified a Recipe for Success that can be replicated to suit the unique needs of different regions. During the Working Lands for Wildlife National Landowner Forum, discussion focused on these elements and the core values associated with each of them.

Trust and Credibility

Participants emphasized that trust and credibility were the most important elements and the key starting points for all partnership efforts. Because NRCS is typically well established within rural communities, agency staff are uniquely positioned to foster collaboration. However, in different areas of the United States, trust and credibility may start first with other groups or agencies including the state fish and wildlife agency, local conservation district, migratory bird joint venture, or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. Trust and credibility is the basic platform that helps open doors and begin the "kitchen table" conversation to identify common interests that can make a difference for the operation as well as benefit target species. Essential to all of this is confidentiality and privacy protection regarding a landowner's operation and their voluntary conservation efforts. The trust and credibility then flows from the initial conversations and projects, out into communities as landowners talk with their neighbors and expand shared visions for working landscapes. The relationships and trust that are built during this process ultimately invite cooperation over conflict, and have proven to be far more effective than regulatory approaches.

Conservation efforts often start with building trust and credibility around the kitchen table. Credit: USDA NRCS.

National Working Lands for Wildlife Coordinator, Galon Hall, describes the campaign to Forum participants. Credit: Steve Jester.

Bog turtle and golden-winged warbler. Credits: USDA NRCS.

Shared Vision

From the foundation of trust and credibility, forum participants recognized that partners should develop a shared vision on which to focus. This is often an extended process to identify those areas of common ground and engage a variety of partners. During this process it is essential to respect the local vision and knowledge, but to also help enhance and expand the vision throughout the community and landscape. As the conversations continue and the trust and credibility builds, the shared vision develops and the spheres of common interest will likely expand so there is greater overlap on issues and approaches that everyone can agree upon.

Strategic Approach

Forum participants recognized the value of developing a strategic approach to landscape conservation in order to direct efforts and practices where they will be most effective. This includes developing decision support tools (e.g. mapping layers, integrated landscape models, etc.) to identify priority areas based on conservation value in order to prioritize actions and drive desired outcomes. Attendees agreed that target species can provide a starting point to engage landowners and the community. However, they also recognized that broader habitat conservation and resource values also drive the strategic approach. Identifying achievable, measurable goals will ultimately have the greatest cumulative effect for the resource.

Accountability

There was broad recognition that without being able to quantify impacts of conservation efforts through well-designed evaluation, long term success would ultimately be challenged. Accountability helps provide credibility with wildlife managers overseeing recovery of at-risk species and with the general public that deserves clarity on the value of public investments in conservation. Participants also recognized the importance of more effectively communicating positive outcomes and boiling down complex science so it both makes sense to a broader audience and is relevant to the public. Ultimately, this accountability will ensure the investment is achieving the shared vision of the partnership and will help inform the public about the value of the investment.

Leverage

Forum participants recognized that as the strategic approach develops, there is an opportunity to expand partnerships and identify partner resources that can support implementation. With regional variations, there is typically a broad network of interest groups, agencies, and academic institutions interested in conservation of landscapes or target species. Connecting with and expanding these networks can help landowners and partners identify opportunities to leverage funding, provide necessary science for project targeting or evaluation, implement conservation projects, and more. Leveraging is essential to sustaining the effort far beyond an individual operation or short-term conservation initiative.

Predictability for Target Species

NRCS and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service negotiated regulatory predictability for landowners engaged in Working Lands for Wildlife conservation efforts directed toward the seven national target species (greater sage-grouse, lesser prairie-chicken, Southwest willow flycatcher, golden-winged warbler, New England cottontail, gopher tortoise, and bog turtle) should the species be listed under the Endangered Species Act. Specifics of these agreements for each target species can be explored by contacting WLFW staff.

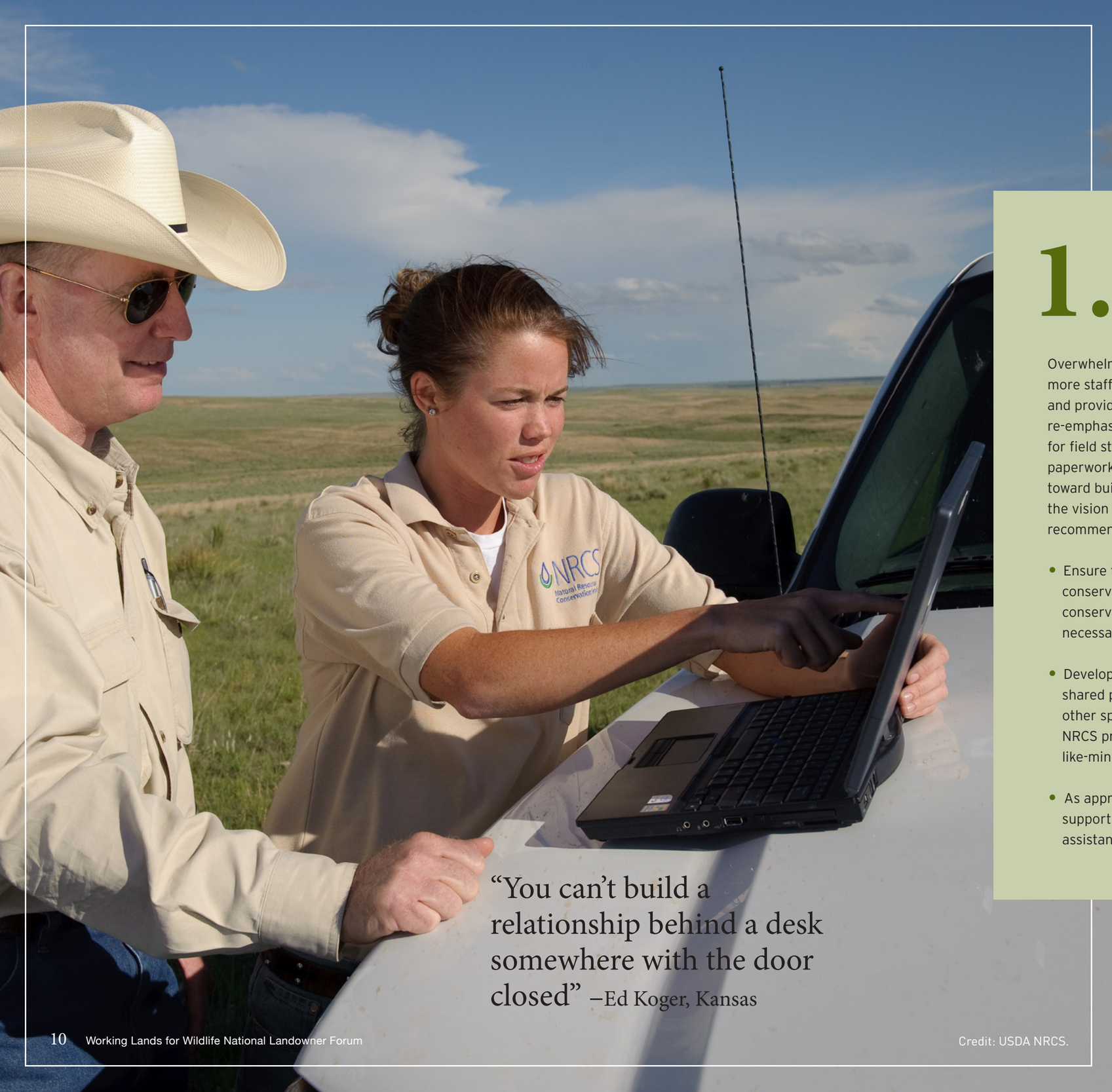
Regulatory Predictability

For most participating landowners, regulatory predictability regarding the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is important to allow them to make improvements to their operation without fear of future regulations. While an important part of Working Lands for Wildlife, not all landowners in attendance were motivated by the promise of regulatory predictability. Furthermore, as Working Lands for Wildlife expands, future target species may not necessitate predictability commitments depending upon their regulatory status. However, all agreed that, where appropriate, the predictability commitments can help improve relationships with landowners by providing a safe way to develop proactive conservation efforts for species when concern for future regulations exist. Working Lands for Wildlife can help provide both the technical and financial support for landowners to improve habitat on their property, and the regulatory predictability to ensure that they will not face regulation down the road as long as they maintain their conservation practices.

Recommendations

During the discussions at the Working Lands for Wildlife National Forum, the participating landowners widely supported the concept of Working Lands for Wildlife and the vision of expanding it to broader landscapes and other species. They also supported maintaining the focus on achieving measurable biological outcomes. There were several core themes that resonated throughout the meeting that coalesced into recommendations for enhancing Working Lands for Wildlife.

Credit: USDA NRCS.



"You can't build a relationship behind a desk somewhere with the door closed" –Ed Koger, Kansas

Credit: USDA NRCS.

1. *Increase Conservation Technical Assistance*

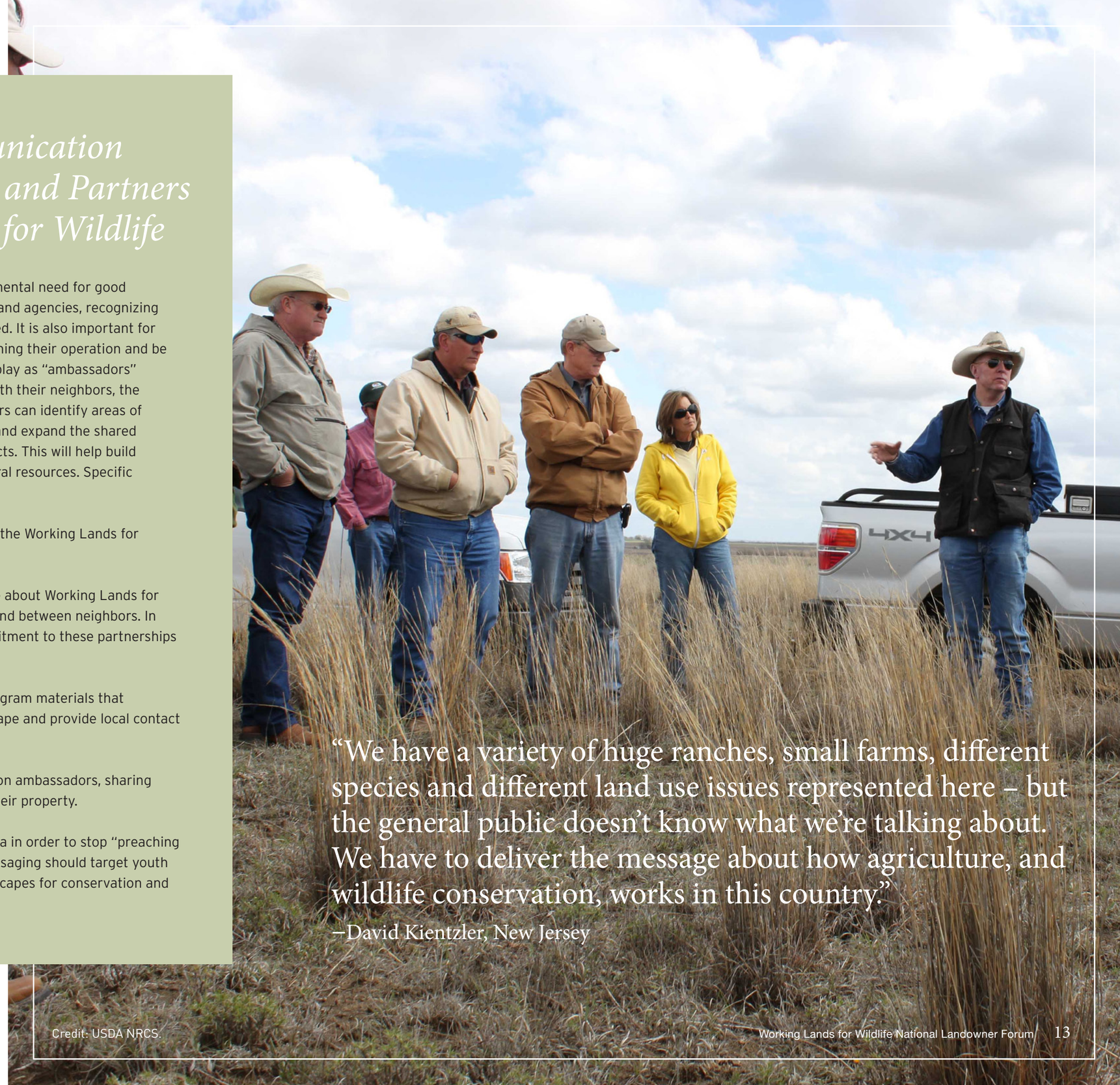
Overwhelmingly, participants recognized that it was essential for NRCS to have more staff in the field, building relationships with landowners, offering help, and providing conservation assistance. The group recommended that NRCS re-emphasize conservation technical assistance and create greater opportunity for field staff to spend time in the field rather than working on administrative paperwork in the office. An emphasis on technical assistance will go a long way toward building trust and credibility within the community and helping to spread the vision of Working Lands for Wildlife throughout the landscape. Specific recommendations included:

- Ensure that NRCS field staff is able to maximize effective roles, allowing conservationists to focus their time on relationship-building and on-the-ground conservation work, while having administrative staff assume the burden of necessary paperwork.
- Develop relationships that could support technical service providers or additional shared partner-funded technical experts to provide conservation planning or other specialized technical services (e.g. foresters, engineers, etc.) that fit into NRCS programs. This is a great tool to build relationships and partnerships with like-minded organizations and help leverage resources for conservation efforts.
- As appropriate, Partners for Conservation and other partner organizations can support NRCS by advocating the critical need for conservation technical assistance with elected officials.

2. *Promote Effective Communication with Landowners, NRCS, and Partners regarding Working Lands for Wildlife*

Throughout the meeting, participants regularly came back to the fundamental need for good communication. This starts with the conversations between landowners and agencies, recognizing the importance of first impressions when landowners are initially engaged. It is also important for conservation staff to appreciate the challenges landowners face maintaining their operation and be able to relate to those concerns. Landowners have an important role to play as "ambassadors" sharing the results and successes of these public-private partnerships with their neighbors, the general public, and elected officials. Communication ensures that partners can identify areas of common interest, can work together to expand partnerships to develop and expand the shared vision, and can develop strategic efforts and accountability for the projects. This will help build broader support for the importance of working lands in conserving natural resources. Specific recommendations included:

- Develop "elevator messaging" – concise ways to consistently describe the Working Lands for Wildlife vision when in brief conversations or in initial outreach.
- Develop materials that can clearly communicate a consistent message about Working Lands for Wildlife. These materials can help in initial outreach with landowners and between neighbors. In addition, the materials can help expand internal knowledge and commitment to these partnerships with agency staff and potential partners.
- As appropriate, develop regional materials to support the national program materials that emphasize specific projects and opportunities within a state or landscape and provide local contact information to give individuals a starting point to engage.
- Encourage participating landowners to become landowner conservation ambassadors, sharing their story, engaging in community outreach, and providing tours of their property.
- Develop YouTube videos, social media messaging, and other new media in order to stop "preaching to the choir" and expand support with the general public. Specific messaging should target youth and the urban public about the value and importance of working landscapes for conservation and to promote our land use legacy.



"We have a variety of huge ranches, small farms, different species and different land use issues represented here – but the general public doesn't know what we're talking about. We have to deliver the message about how agriculture, and wildlife conservation, works in this country."

—David Kientzler, New Jersey

Credit: USDA NRCS.

"It always begins with us – when we reach out, people reach back. That's how we build trust and credibility." –Warren Mickey, West Virginia

Credit: Joe Milmoe, USFWS.

3. *Strengthen/Build Relationships and Partnerships at the Local and Regional Levels*

The foundation of community-based conservation is the relationship between landowners, agencies, and partners. A lack of trust and understanding can cause incurable problems particularly when partners push forward without spending the time to build relationships. Building relationships allows partners to determine what motivates individuals and the community as a whole and work cooperatively together to develop common objectives. The participants identified several key elements that are essential to building relationships that will enhance communities and landscape conservation efforts.

- Understand the important local stakeholders within the landscape – depending on the region this could include local municipalities, conservation districts, grazing coalitions, and others.
- Find common objectives that will motivate partners' engagement and identify priority target areas.
- Fully understand local economic considerations including the ramifications of actions vs. no action – successful conservation depends on keeping working lands working so understanding how to achieve conservation and maintain operations is essential.
- Establish credibility with actions by maintaining trust; take advantage of opportunities to "walk a mile" in a landowner's shoes, get to know and work with individuals, and maintain a consistent presence over the long term.

4. *Ensure Flexibility in Programs, Practices, Relationships, and Partnerships*

Some of the landowners at the forum reflected on the need for flexibility when engaging in conservation efforts. Many programs come out as one-size fits all and that may not work for landowners because operations are often so different that certain program requirements make it less attractive to participate. In addition, there was recognition that potential regional differences might require flexibility in the application of Working Lands for Wildlife in different parts of the country. Ensuring flexibility within specific conservation actions as well as in how partnerships function will help to build relationships and expand opportunities to get the work done. Participants highlighted the following areas where flexibility could be enhanced:

- Encourage flexibility for conservation practices to support specific challenges or opportunities in different landscapes.
- Ensure flexibility among the partners and partnerships within the Working Lands for Wildlife framework, recognize that different parts of the project may require different partners to take the lead.
- Take the time to listen and learn to understand the needs of landowners, then provide flexibility on practices, timing, etc. in order to move beyond "all or nothing" participation.

"A lot of the programs are all or nothing - flexibility is key. You need to decide if it's worth getting something done or accepting the status quo and ending up with the same results." –Evertt Harrell, Texas

Credit: Steve Jester.

"A strategic approach allows us to move beyond being reactive to being proactive." –Dina Moore, California

Credit: USDA NRCS

5. *Identify an Overall Plan and Vision for a Landscape or Target Species that will Motivate Participation and Foster Greater Accountability*

Participants recognized the value of a standard process to develop an overarching plan for the landscape that identifies priorities and actions and is widely supported by a diverse partnership. This plan must come from the shared vision that identifies areas of agreement and opportunity, and takes advantage of existing relationships and natural partnerships. Developing decision support tools to focus conservation efforts will help achieve strategic implementation. Similarly, outcome-based evaluation will ensure that resulting outcomes are quantified so that voluntary conservation actions are able to inform Endangered Species Act regulatory decisions. Specific recommendations included:

- Provide a model of a basic conceptual framework for a Working Lands for Wildlife planning process that can help step the approach down across the country or with different species; the model should be customizable based on the landscape and the partnership.
- Embrace accountability that moves beyond how many dollars are spent or acres are enrolled; ensure that Working Lands for Wildlife partnerships evaluate larger impacts of actions across the landscape.
- Build partnerships within the science community, universities, and organizations to engage in regional Working Lands for Wildlife efforts to help develop decision support tools that guide conservation efforts and to develop outcome-based evaluations that assess effectiveness of actions and quantify resulting outcomes.
- Recognize the importance of shared implementation and vision; threats need to be understood by all partners, and partners need to "pick up their piece" of the implementation that falls outside of NRCS purview.

List of Attendees

Landowners/Land Managers

Quinton (Guy) Anglin
Bascom, Florida

Tom & Antonia Bryson
Shannock, Rhode Island

Russell Davis
Ordway, Colorado (PFC Board)

Jim Faulstich
Highmore, South Dakota (PFC Board)

Nolan C. Galloway III
Ocala, Florida

John Gehman
Ephrata, Pennsylvania

Evertt Harrell
Denver City, Texas

Laura Jackson
Everett, Pennsylvania

David Kientzler
Sandyston, New Jersey

Ed Koger
Wilmore, Kansas

Tuda Libby-Crews
Bueyeros, New Mexico (PFC Board)

Terry Mansfield
Cheney, Washington (PFC Board)

Tom McAvoy
Scotland, Connecticut

Warren Mickey
Charles Town, West Virginia (PFC Board)

Dina Moore
Kneeland, California (PFC Board)

Gary Price
Blooming Grove, Texas (PFC Board)

Bill Sproul
Sedan, Kansas (PFC Board)

Jay Tanner
Grouse Creek, Utah (PFC Board)

Reese Thompson
Vidalia, Georgia (PFC Board)

Richard Williams
Lewistown, Pennsylvania

Ed Zink
Durango, Colorado

Conservation Partners

John Cecil
New Jersey Audubon

Steve Jester
Partners for Conservation,
Executive Director

Julie Sharpe
Narrow River Land Trust
Rhode Island

NRCS

Astor Boozer
West Regional Conservationist
Washington, DC

Bridgett Costanzo
East Working Lands for Wildlife Coordinator
Richmond, Virginia

Clint Evans
Colorado State Conservationist
Denver, Colorado

Justin Fritscher
Public Affairs Specialist
Washington, DC

Tim Griffiths
West Working Lands for
Wildlife Coordinator
Bozeman, Montana

Galon Hall
National Working Lands for Wildlife
Coordinator
Washington, DC

Thad Heater
Sage Grouse Initiative Coordinator
Reno, Nevada

Don Keirstead
State Resource Conservationist
Dover, New Hampshire

Tim Macklin
Western Governor's Association Liason
Denver, Colorado

Evan Madlinger
Biologist
Frenchtown, New Jersey

Melissa Martin
East Science Advisor
Ft. Lauderdale, Florida

Curt McDaniel
Assistant State Conservationist
Columbia, Missouri

Dave Naugle
Sage Grouse Initiative Science Advisor
Missoula, Montana

Kyle Tackett
District Conservationist
Dillon, Montana

Jon Ungerer
Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative
Coordinator
Marysville, Kansas

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

PARTNERS FOR CONSERVATION

INTERMOUNTAIN WEST JOINT VENTURE
conserving habitat through partnerships

Meeting Facilitation and Report Development:
Jodi Stemler Consulting, LLC
jodi@stemlerconsulting.com

Graphic Design: MajaDesign, Inc.
majadesignvt@comcast.net

Partners for Conservation
P.O. Box 1876
Blanco, TX 78606
512-663-7596
info@partnersforconservation,org
www.partnersforconservation.org