WILDLIFE HABITAT COUNCIL℠

HABITAT

Grasslands Project Guidance

Stakeholder Informed

Introduction

Broadly defined, grasslands are an ecosystem dominated by herbaceous vegetation – typically grasses and wildflowers – with woody species covering no more than 10-20% of the ground area. Grasslands include both communities that require maintenance to retain their open nature, such as meadows, old fields and shrublands, and communities in which climate and other conditions prevent tree establishment, such as short-grass prairie. Although grasslands include no-mow zones enhanced to provide habitat, they do not include mowed lawns. In some cases, grasslands may be wet or inundated for a period of time.

Grasslands provide essential habitat for a variety of species such as pollinators and other insects, songbirds, grassland birds, raptors and small mammals. Grassland ecosystems around the world are becoming increasingly scarce as they are destroyed, degraded or fragmented by development. Protection and restoration of grassland ecosystems is vital for conserving biodiversity.

Grasslands projects can drive numerous educational opportunities. These opportunities include awareness about grassland habitat and grassland species, the importance of grassland ecosystems, and the various transitional stages grasslands undergo, as well as carbon sequestration, nutrient cycling, climate change and water issues.

Building Your Program

Projects are divided into four categories: **Habitat**, **Species Management**, **Education and Awareness** and **Other Options.** You can build a program with more than one of each category but you must associate your program with at least one habitat. This Grasslands Project Guidance is in the **Habitat** category. You will be able to associate your grasslands project with **Education and Awareness** projects, as well as with **Species Management** projects like those focused on pollinators and birds.

- **Habitat** – Projects that focus on conservation actions to protect, restore and manage different habitats.
- **Species Management** – Projects addressing the conservation needs of targeted wildlife species or groups of species.
- **Education and Awareness** – Projects to improve awareness, understanding and skills relating to conservation and the environment.
- **Other Options** – Specialized projects that add value to your conservation efforts.

Browse the Project Guidance library at ***wildlifehc.org/pg***.

What Do Grasslands Projects Look Like?

Grasslands projects manage and restore existing grassland habitat or create new tracts of grassland habitat (an open area dominated primarily by grasses and wildflowers, with few or no trees or shrubs.) *If your project's habitat does not look like this, consider applying under a different project category.*

Grasslands projects can vary widely in size, depending on the amount of land and resources available. The size of a contiguous grassland tract, whether located on one property or across neighboring properties, will affect which species it will benefit. Smaller tracts can provide habitat for pollinators and some songbirds. Larger, contiguous tracts of grassland can provide habitat for these species, as well as ungulates, raptors, waterfowl and grassland birds.

Educational and outreach opportunities can vary based on different-sized grasslands projects. Smaller grasslands can serve as a small-scale demonstration of grassland habitat and native species, while larger grasslands provide opportunities for wildlife viewing, citizen science, nature trails and outdoor classroom activities.

Considerations for Corporate Lands

Projects implemented on corporate-owned lands have different circumstances and challenges to those on public lands, protected lands or wild lands.

Which types of corporate lands are best suited for grasslands projects?

Many corporations own large tracts of land where grassland habitat could be restored or created. These types of lands range from: corporate campuses with large lawns that could be converted to grassland; landfills where the creation of grassland habitat fits in well with landfill capping needs; and quarries and other sites where restoration needs can be appropriately met through grassland creation or restoration. Smaller properties such as urban sites and terminals may include small grassland, which can provide patches of habitat for highly-mobile species like pollinators and birds, and serve as a demonstration habitat for the community.

Addressing challenges

The corporate context presents certain challenges for implementing grasslands projects. Understanding these concerns and potential ways to overcome them can help your project succeed in the long term.

Concern	Response
Non-native and invasive plants make it difficult to create or restore a grassland habitat that can perpetuate itself in the long term.	*Utilize technical advice to ensure there are native species in the seed mix and work diligently to monitor for and control invasive species on a regular basis.* *Use interpretive features like signage and communication with co-workers to ease concerns during the establishment period.*
There is a great deal of regional and even local variation in grassland habitat types and their appropriate species composition, maintenance regimes, etc.	*Teams should use reference information about the grassland types for their region, as well as local expertise, to determine the appropriate grassland types to restore or create.*
Team members' knowledge will have gaps in areas like species identification and best management techniques.	*Knowledgeable staff or local experts from an existing initiative, NGO or university can provide training and easy-to-use tools for project implementation and monitoring.*

Concern	Response
In some cases, aesthetic concerns may be expressed due to the unruly look of grasslands and the plain appearance of many native plants.	*WHC staff can work with the site to help develop an aesthetically-pleasing plant mixture with blooms across many seasons and help create a more structured design.* *Making the project look more intentional and cared for with features like mowed edges, split-rail fencing along the edge and informational signage can help allay public concerns about appearance.* *Outreach efforts can also help educate the community about the value of the project.*
Some programs may lack the knowledge base or resources to conduct a controlled burn safely.	*Work with experts in using prescribed fire as a safe grassland management tool.*

Getting Started with Grasslands Projects

For a project to qualify toward Conservation Certification, you must be able to answer "yes" to five questions.

1. Is the project locally appropriate?
2. Does it have a stated conservation or education objective?
3. Does it provide value or benefit to the natural community?
4. Have outcomes been measured and is there supporting documentation?
5. Does it exceed any pertinent regulatory requirements?

Conservation and education objectives

It is a requirement of Conservation Certification that grasslands projects be designed to meet one or more conservation objectives. Objectives can guide the direction of the project, help motivate others to participate and provide a basis for evaluation.

The following objectives are suggested for grasslands projects. Your team may choose one or more of these objectives, or develop your own relevant objectives.

- Restoring or creating grassland habitat
- Managing a grassland habitat to benefit a specific species or suite of species
- Managing a grassland to reduce the amount of non-native and invasive species
- Restoring or managing a grassland with the intent to create a self-perpetuating ecosystem
- Managing a grassland to restore a healthy soil profile
- Providing examples and education for employees and community members on native grassland ecosystem

The following strategies are recommended to strengthen the conservation impact of your project:

- If grazing occurs, implement a grazing plan that balances the needs of grazing species and the ecosystem
- Manage so that the grassland exceeds a minimum level of native plant diversity appropriate to the region
- Be located adjacent to an existing protected grassland and managed in alignment with that grassland
- Incorporate ongoing cooperation with an existing grassland conservation initiative or local or regional conservation plan
- Use the habitat to educate about grassland-relevant biology, through visits to the grassland and off-site presentations.
- Meet the habitat needs for one or more species of concern
- Serve as a demonstration of grassland ecosystems and native grassland species, and their importance
- Incorporate an ecologically appropriate plan for maintaining the open nature of the grassland that includes mechanical, chemical and cultural approaches.
- Monitor the grassland for invasive species and apply appropriate and safe control methods
- Control invasive species by using Integrated Vegetation Management (IVM) or Integrated Pest Management (IPM).
- Establish for at least 3 years following planting or start of maintenance, with an expressed commitment of 7 years
- Include regular, credible monitoring of one or more grassland-dependent wildlife species, such as grassland birds, butterflies and moths, or imperiled species
- Establish a baseline of plant and animal species in the grassland habitat, upon which desired outcomes can be based and evaluated
- Assess landscape-level function, such as buffers, linkages, and watershed health, and document for current or future needs

- Manage as part of an integrated complex of vegetative community types
- Provide opportunities for students, professors and other scientific professionals to conduct research in the grassland
- Share knowledge resulting from the project with an outside entity through conferences or peer-reviewed journals.
- Minimize human-caused fragmentation and disturbance
- Establish for at least five years following planting or start of maintenance, with an expressed commitment of 10-15 years

Partnerships

Grasslands projects implemented on corporate lands can benefit from partnerships with groups that have established grassland conservation and education objectives. A team can use such a partnership to help design, create, or monitor its grasslands project and provide educational opportunities for employees and community members. Partners may also be able to connect the project to local, regional or national funding opportunities.

Resources

Your project may benefit from online or printed resources available for your region to support the design, delivery, maintenance and monitoring of grasslands projects.

A search for "grassland" in the Conservation Registry returns over 200 projects implemented through WHC's certification program. This is a great place to find inspiration for your project and see what others are doing in and around your location.

The following terms, in any combination, may be useful when searching online for items related to this theme:

grasslands
prairie
pampas
veldt
gield
meadow
grasses
forbs
grassland species
grassland community
grassland biome
grassland animals
upland grassland
temperate grassland
tropical grassland
vegetation
habitat succession
graminoids
species richness
soil fertility
steppe
llano
tundra
rangeland
plain

Understanding the Application Process

Documentation

When applying for Conservation Certification, you will provide documentation of the planning, implementation, maintenance and monitoring of your grasslands project. The following is required documentation for grasslands projects; however, you may submit additional supporting materials.

Map/image of the project area, showing the relative size and approximate location of the project (other relevant information can be shown in the map as well, but is not required).

Planting plan/design for all plantings that have been done, or any planting that has been done since the program last achieved Conservation Certification. Recommended items to include in the planting plan are:

- Site and regional appropriateness – what is the reference system, soil information, and local expertise used to choose the species list?
- Planting list with information about function that includes:
  - Name of plant (genus and species)
  - Bloom time
  - Which species/taxonomic groups it attracts and what habitat function it provides
- Technological intervention where appropriate for irrigation or other habitat improvements
- Educational features such as signage and trails
- Any additional steps taken to ensure success of the implementation, such as soil tests, soil prep, revision of the plant list by a technical expert, etc.

Photographs and videos that depict the progress of the project implementation and management.

Maintenance plans that show regionally appropriate maintenance activities that reflect the needs of the grassland habitat to fully support the target species and support the conservation and education objectives.

For grazed lands, the maintenance plan can be a **grazing plan**, which should describe how grazing lands will be managed in a way that provides for the needs of grazing animals, as well as for the needs of native wildlife, native habitats, and water quality.

Budget, receipts, invoices, etc. for implementation or maintenance, such as seed mixes, equipment rental, burn permits, soil tests, associated structures, and maintenance.

Updated plant list/survey that lists all of the plant species currently known to occur in the grassland, including common and scientific names and whether the plant species is native.

Monitoring logs that show the frequency, type, and results of monitoring of the project, whether in an informal manner or a scientifically rigorous manner. Include evidence when formal citizen science or other existing monitoring protocols have been utilized, and name the protocols used.

Examples of monitoring efforts that could be documented for a grasslands project include, but are not limited to:

- Wildlife monitoring logs showing use of the grasslands by targeted species or other wildlife species, such as casual observations or more formal butterfly counts
- Plant diversity monitoring documenting the presence and absence of species
- Plant establishment monitoring documenting plant survival, growth rate and health
- Vegetative percent cover
- Invasive species surveys
- Floristic quality surveys

Examples of technical advice utilized in researching the project, such as consultants, guidebooks, websites, journal articles, etc.

Letter of support from a grasslands specialist with whom your program is working.

Application questions

As you complete the application online, you will be asked the following questions about your pollinator project. These questions will help us understand and evaluate your project.

	Question	Why this question is important
Objective	What are the project's conservation objectives?	*Having a conservation objective is a requirement for certification.*
Overview	What is the total size of the grassland managed for this project?	*This provides us with a description of your project to allow us to assess it.*
	Describe the habitat in general including plants and structures.	
	Give a brief description of the vegetation types found in the habitat and list several of the common plant species.	
	Briefly summarize activities taking place to manage the targeted habitat.	
	Upload a map showing the location and photos showing the grassland habitat.	
	When did on the ground work for the project begin?	
Habitat Creation or Expansion	Give a brief description of the vegetation types found in the habitat and list several of the common plant species.	*For grassland habitat, size and location are important factors that determine success and ecological benefit.*

	Question	Why this question is important
Habitat Creation or Expansion, continued	Upload a dated list of current plant species in the habitat including common and scientific names and whether the species is native to the region.	*For grassland habitat, size and location are important factors that determine success and ecological benefit.*
	Is this a new project not presented in previous applications?	
	Does it replace a habitat with less ecological value?	
	Describe the habitat prior to your project.	
	Describe any design or plant selection considerations that were part of this new project.	
	Upload documentation of the specific considerations.	
	Since the last application, have you expanded the size of your grassland or the area being managed?	
	What is the size of the grassland that has been added since the last application?	
	Does the grassland expansion replace a habitat with less ecological value?	
	Describe the habitat present prior to your project.	
	Describe any design or plant selection considerations that were part of this project expansion.	

	Question	Why this question is important
Habitat Creation or Expansion, continued	Upload documentation of the specific considerations.	*For grassland habitat, size and location are important factors that determine success and ecological benefit.*
	What is the size of the area that is being newly managed since the last application?	
	How is the area maintained as a grassland - Burning, chemical treatment, grazing, mowing, other?	
Management	Describe the steps taken to maintain the grassland.	*Appropriate management policies and practices are also important to the target species.*
	Provide a timeline of maintenance and other completed activities.	
	Is the habitat fragmented by roads, trails, fences, drainage tiles, etc.?	
	Describe any steps to minimize fragmentation of the grassland	
	Upload documentation of these activities.	
	Was baseline data collected for this project?	
Monitoring	Describe the types of baseline data collected.	*Monitoring is essential to understand the impact of the project and to be able to adapt the project develops.*
	Upload the baseline data.	

	Question	Why this question is important
Monitoring	Describe the types of baseline data collected.	*Monitoring is essential to understand the impact of the project and to be able to adapt the project develops.*
	Upload the baseline data.	
	Select each type of monitoring that is being carried out: plant surveys, plant sampling, plant diversity assessment, species (flora and fauna) counts, other.	
	List each type of monitoring, including the frequency and list any plans or protocols used.	
	Upload the monitoring protocols, if applicable.	
	Upload the monitoring data and any analysis, if applicable.	
	Provide a brief summary of results from monitoring.	
	Evaluate the success of the project. If there were any concerns, what are the plans to address them in the future?	
Employee Participation	Do employees actively contribute to the grassland project?	
	How many employees participate in the project on a regular basis?	*Employee participation can strengthen a project and secure its future.*
	Describe how employees are involved in this project.	
	How many employee hours were spent on the following activities each year?	

	Question	Why this question is important
Other Participants	Do any groups or individuals outside of your company actively contribute to the project on a regular basis?	*It is not always possible to recruit outside groups to a project. Conservation and education partners can strengthen a project and provide different audiences to use it for lessons or recreation, thus broadening its reach.*
	Select the types of groups: community members, consultants and contractors, government agencies, NGO partners, schools and universities, youth organizations, other companies.	
	List the names of the groups you work with.	
	Describe their involvement in this project.	
	How many hours were spent by the groups on the following activities each year?	
	If you work with a grassland specialist and have a current letter of support from them, upload it here.	
	List additional sources of technical advice (e.g. website, guidebook, etc.) and describe how they were used.	
Regulatory Requirements	Are any aspects of the project done in relation to regulatory requirements?	*Going beyond compliance is a requirement for certification.*
	Explain how the project exceeds requirements.	

	Question	Why this question is important
Connectivity	Does the project connect with other grassland habitats on neighboring land?	*Connectivity onsite and across fence lines helps to decrease fragmentation, one of the leading causes of habitat loss.*
	Describe how the project connects to other grassland habitats.	
	Describe any coordinated management efforts with other grassland habitats.	
	Does the project align with any larger scale initiatives? (e.g. corporate strategy, regional conservation plan, migratory pathway, watershed plan, etc.)	
	Is the project part of a corporate level commitment to grassland.	
Alignments	Upload documentation of your corporate commitment to grassland.	*Aligning conservation efforts with large-scale conservation plans and other regional conservation initiatives allows a site-based activity to support a landscape-scale objective.*
	Does the project align with an existing conservation plan or other large-scale initiative?	
	List the conservation plans or other large-scale initiatives the project aligns with and provide website links, if available.	
	How does your project align with these large-scale initiatives?	
	Does this project have third party grassland related certification?	
Existing Certifications	List the certifications and provide a website link if available.	*Other certifications or recognitions illustrate strong efforts and commitments.*

Content development for Conservation Certification

To inform the development of Conservation Certification, WHC analyzed the projects it was recognizing through its certification program to assess whether they were aligned with contemporary conservation and education priorities.

Following this assessment and using information from it, WHC convened Advisory Committees around conservation and education themes to develop the content that would guide practitioners and applicants in the future. This content is the basis for the Project Guidance and the online application process.

The following provided feedback on the initial draft of the Grasslands Project Guidance:

Joe Bartholomew, Freeport-McMoRan Inc.
Phil Boyd, Gleason Clay Company LLC
Kevin Cooperrider, Oldcastle Materials
Kelly Deen, Freeport-McMoRan Inc.
Joe Duggan, Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever
Aaron Feggestad, Stantec Inc.
Galon Hall, National Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture
Dan Lebedyk, Essex Region Conservation Authority
Mike Pellant, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Department of the Interior
Giles Perkins, Unimin Corporation
Duane Pool, Bird Conservatory of the Rockies
Aimee Roberson, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of the Interior
Kimberli Stine, National Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture
Don Tilton, ECT Inc.

More information can be found about this process in the “Our Impact” section of wildlifehc.org under “Commitment to Transparency.”

WILDLIFE HABITAT COUNCIL℠

The WHC Strategy and Planning team can help you build a successful project by identifying needs, making connections with partners and resources, and providing strategies that meet business and conservation goals. Contact us today.

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Every act of conservation matters.