



*Bringing back the birds*

January 24, 2023

The Honorable Senator Debbie Stabenow  
Chair, Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and  
Forestry Committee

The Honorable Representative Glenn  
Thompson Chair, House Agriculture  
Committee

The Honorable Senator John Boozman  
Ranking Member, Senate Agriculture,  
Nutrition, and Forestry Committee

The Honorable Representative David Scott  
Ranking Member, House Agriculture  
Committee

Dear Chairs and Ranking Members:

As Congress begins crafting the 2023 Farm Bill, American Bird Conservancy and many of our partners have some important bird-friendly concepts we hope you will consider to address the loss of 3 billion birds in North America since 1970.

On behalf of the undersigned organizations, we ask for your support in the development of new bird conservation opportunities in western rangelands, where grassland birds, like Meadowlarks, have lost more ground and are declining faster than other bird groups. We represent birdwatchers and bird conservationists from across the country. Birdwatching is one of the most popular recreational activities in the United States with an estimated 45 million Americans participating. Bird and other wildlife watchers spend an estimated \$76 Billion per year. Bird Conservationists represent an even broader group of Americans who enjoy bird feeding, habitat restoration, and hunting.

The Farm Bill sets policy and provides incentives that make or break bird habitat in much of our country. Title 2 is arguably the most important conservation program in the world. Our goal is to show you the possibilities that exist for the Farm Bill and our farmers and ranchers when we look at conservation with an eye toward improving bird habitat. Birds tell us a lot about the environment in which we live.

Our first recommendation is the creation of a new Rangeland Conservation Program (RCP) under the Farm Service Agency in the Farm Bill. The purpose of RCP is to ensure that ranchers can continue to ranch profitably while providing much-needed conservation services that benefit local communities, wildlife, and the climate. Under this new program, willing producers would enroll their ranch in a working lands program aimed at resting a single pasture at a time in a sequence eventually cycling through all of the ranch's pastures. Producers would be paid annual cash rent similar to that used for Grassland CRP for only those acres rested in a given year. This program would be aimed at 10- to 20-year contracts.

The undersigned also support a second recommendation requiring the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to create practice scenarios within existing programs (i.e. EQIP,

CSP, and RCPP) that also target annual rest in rangelands. These suites of practices would provide short- to intermediate-term contracts to rest specific pastures to help achieve needed conservation outcomes by improving the condition of the plants.

This element would compensate for foregone income while allowing ample time for the practice scenarios to take effect. They would also create numerous approaches to help NRCS foster broad conservation efforts in rangelands.

Approximately 30 percent of the United States is rangeland (~770 million acres), mostly in the western states. Rangelands are highly diverse and provide livestock forage and habitat for many declining wildlife species. One such high profile species that would immediately and greatly benefit from the two above approaches is the Lesser Prairie-chicken, recently listed under the Endangered Species Act.

Healthy rangelands provide conservation services, including carbon storage, water filtration, erosion control, and nutrient cycling, and are vital to recovering grassland bird populations. Rangelands are often very dry and conservation actions take more time to establish than in wetter parts of the country. Grassland birds need healthy, functioning rangelands to survive.

Periodic rest increases and improves plant species diversity, heterogeneity, soil health, stability, and ranch profitability. These “Rest-Recover-Recapture” efforts would allow most ranches in the western U.S. to economically incorporate rest in their grazing systems. These actions prioritize keeping rangelands as rangelands, while continuing to provide a multitude of environmental, economic, and societal benefits, including quality grassland bird habitats needed to reverse population declines. Prairie grouse will almost immediately benefit from rested pastures.

Please help landowners restore, enhance, and protect habitat for birds and improved plant productivity while increasing plant-based carbon storage. The above concepts provide two strong new options for voluntarily conserving ranch and other grasslands in the 2023 Farm Bill. This includes a Rangeland Conservation Program under FSA, and incentives for appropriate rest through applicable NRCS conservation programs.

Thank you for considering these recommendations.

Sincerely,



Steven Riley  
Director of Farm Bill Policy  
American Bird Conservancy

CC: Secretary Tom Vilsack, NRCS Chief Terry Crosby, NRCS Associate Chief Louis Aspey

### **Groups That Signed-On**

American Bird Conservancy  
North American Grouse Partnership  
National Bobwhite and Grassland Initiative  
Kansas Grazing Land Coalition  
South Dakota Grassland Coalition  
Bird Conservation Network  
National Association of Forest Service Retirees  
Wildlife Forever  
American Bird Conservancy Action Fund  
Arkansas Valley Audubon Society  
Audubon Society of Central Arkansas  
Boulder County Audubon Society  
Boulder County Nature Association  
Columbia Land Trust  
Conservation Northwest  
Delaware Audubon  
Endangered Habitats League  
Environmental Protection Information Center  
Friends of the San Pedro River, Inc  
Hawk Mountain Sanctuary Association  
High Country Audubon Society  
Lake Cook Chapter of Illinois Audubon Society  
Lehigh Valley Audubon Society  
Lower Columbia Basin Audubon  
Los Angeles Audubon Society  
Maryland Ornithological Society  
Minnesota Sharp-tailed Grouse Society  
New York City Audubon Society  
North Central Washington Audubon Society  
Raptors Are The Solution  
Rocky Mountain Wild  
Salem Audubon Society  
San Diego Audubon Society  
Saving Southern Maryland's Grassland Birds  
Sierra Foothills Audubon Society  
Sierra Nevada Alliance  
South Bend-Elkhart Audubon Society  
Sycamore Audubon  
The Sugar Pine Foundation  
The Teal Club  
The Urban Wildlands Group  
Virginia Bluebird Society  
Washington Crossing Audubon Society

Western Nebraska Resources Council  
Zumbro Valley Audubon