**Western Rangeland Conservation Fund:**

*Providing Access for the Next Generation of Rangeland Stewards while Increasing the Pace and Scale of Conserved Land*

**A Concept for Review**

New conservation tools are needed that provide opportunities for the next generation of land rangeland stewards and allow for local ranching families to expand operations – *while increasing the pace and scale of conserved lands*. To meet this challenge, we propose the development of a Western Rangeland Conservation Fund that provides financial returns to investors while achieving social and natural resource goals across western rangelands.

***The Need***

Globally grasslands and shrublands (rangelands) are the least protected and most threatened natural system. This is true in the American West and the western Great Plains where a large proportion of rangeland is held in private ownership. In addition to providing habitat for icons of America’s natural heritage, generations of ranching families have historically stewarded these lands - producing food and fiber, maintaining cultural traditions, and sustaining livelihoods embedded in the American psyche.

Good ranching practices have supported healthy natural landscapes, and are increasingly recognized as one of the most compatible land uses with the conservation of our natural resources. Yet, residents of local ranching communities are often priced out of land to start or expand operations leading to subdivision and fragmentation of these important areas. Next generations are leaving these places and seeking other occupations, where the return on investment is greater and more predictable. Global markets are replacing once local economies and leading to the decline of agricultural infrastructure and service providers in rural areas.

The conservation community has created tools to maintain important private working lands, like tax incentives, conservation easements, and cost-share programs. The rate of loss, however, still out paces the rate of conservation and these strategies do not necessarily provide grazing opportunities for local or next generation stewards. We need a new tools, particularly financing mechanisms, to accelerate the pace and scale of rangeland conservation, to increase access to working lands for the next generation of stewards and for current producers to expand operations, and to implement best management practices that maintain healthy natural resources and provide economic returns.

***A Proposed Solution***

In recent years, new capital and investment funds have been created and successfully applied to achieve conservation of forested ecosystems in the US at a greater scale and pace than ever before while applying conservation oriented silvicultural practices. These forest conservation investment funds provide insights and models that can be adapted to achieve similar success in western rangelands.

We propose developing a Western Rangeland Conservation Fund that would aggregate impact investments, such as foundation programmatic related investments (PRIs), private investors willing to accept lower returns for greater social and environmental impact, and corporate investments to achieve social responsibility goals, and use these funds to temporarily acquire properties with high conservation values. The fund would work with partners, such as local cattlemen’s and stock growers’ associations, to identify qualified young, new, or local ranchers to manage the property under a lease arrangement with the goal of transitioning ownership to the lessee after several years.

In partnership with the lessee, the Fund would implement conservation and best management practices to improve the condition and productivity of resources on the property. The lessee would also receive agricultural business training, technical support, and time to establish credit to acquire the property and successfully launch or expand their ranching enterprise (see the “How the Fund Could Work”).

The long-term goal is to develop a fund that would invest in working rangelands of high conservation value throughout the American West and western Great Plains. Key to the success of the fund is identifying location specific criteria, such as intact agricultural service economies, local partners, and property values where investments are likely to generate targeted returns.

***Piloting the Concept***

To test the feasibility of this concept and the overall fund structure, a pilot effort would target investments in 8-10 properties of 3,000 acres or larger in landscapes with identified criteria (likely in areas of Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, or South Dakota). These would be primarily non-irrigated lands selling for $300-$1,200 per acre.

The pilot fund would target raising at least $20 million with an investment period of 4 years. It is anticipated that partial return of investor capital would be achieved by selling a conservation easement on the property. The property should generate cash flow during operations from lease payments, conservation incentive programs, and other opportunities (e.g., hunting access). Final return would be achieved by sale of the property to the lessee. The term of the fund would be 12 years.

If the pilot fund is successful, it will offer appropriate financial returns and significant conservation and community impact on approximately 50,000 acres of land providing opportunities to 8-10 young, new, or local ranching families who are not able to acquire ranchland or expand operations under conventional approaches. Lessons learned from a successful pilot will be used to expand the geographic and financial scope of the Fund throughout the West and to increase its social and natural resource impact.

***How the Fund Could Work***

Western Rangeland Conservation Fund