

Potential New Tools for Financing Conservation In the Rocky Mountain West and Northern Great Plains

Capacity Building Working Session

Session Host(s): Travis Brammer, Drew Bennett, Claire Hood, and Galen Guerrero-Murphy

Session Facilitators: Claire Harper

Description of Session: This session will consider three models for financing conservation in the Rocky Mountain West and Great Plains. The first model, led by scholars at the University of Wyoming and Colorado State University, focuses on bridging the gap between the aging population of agriculturalists and the next generation of farmers and ranchers who are interested in taking over the land and continuing to manage it for production agriculture while also achieving conservation outcomes. This model relies on a pool of investors or donors contributing to the purchase of a property, on which a conservation easement is sold. The property is leased, at a discount, to a young or beginning producer with the option for them to purchase the property at agricultural value in the future. If viable, conservation groups could use this model to create a subsidiary to manage the entity that owns the land, potentially generating modest profits, while a local land trust would hold the easement and new producers could affordable access grazing land.

The second model, developed by World Wildlife Fund and Quantified Ventures, is an Environmental Impact Fund (EIF). An EIF is an investment vehicle and financing structure that provides financial incentives to ranchers to implement sustainable grazing practices and monetizes the resulting environmental benefits by selling verified outcomes to the beneficiaries of these practices. The beneficiaries of sustainable agriculture or rangeland management are in most cases required to pay up-front for all or part of the costs of planning and practice implementation to achieve the desired benefits. This requires these beneficiaries to take on the operational burden of program design as well as the financial risk associated with the failure or underperformance of projects. In an EIF model, beneficiaries instead pay for their desired outcome only after they have been measured, monitored and verified, thereby reducing risk. If successful, WWF would work with Quantified Ventures to create an independent entity to disburse the financial and technical assistance to participating ranchers.

The third model involves financing conservation with carbon offsets, in particular, those associated with vast grassland carbon sinks in Colorado, the Southern High Plains, and beyond. Grassland conservation priorities with significant climate co-benefits will be explored. Grassland carbon offsets enable landowners and managers in rural communities to monetize conservation with potential steady cash flows and benefit from emerging climate finance and carbon markets. We will present preliminary grassland carbon opportunity analyses, describe current efforts with ranchers and partners, and illuminate how carbon in the grasslands can further conservation more broadly, including potential overlap and synergy with the other two models.

Outline the session: (the session is 90 minutes long- edit this suggested session format)

10 minutes: Introduction and Framing

30 minutes: 2-3 Case Studies presented (preferably by practitioners)

10 minutes: Whole group question and comment

20 minutes: Small breakout group activity

15 minutes: Break out groups share results

5 minutes: Session wrap up, summary of main outcomes and next steps

Case Studies:

1. UW Western Ranchland Conservation Fund Model

Dr. Drew Bennett - MacMillan Professor of Practice in Private Lands Stewardship

Travis Brammer, JD/MA Candidate and Research Assistant

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2. WWF Environmental Impact Fund Model

Claire Hood – Specialist, Sustainable Ranching Initiative

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3. Grassland Carbon in Colorado and the Southern High Plains

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Small breakout group activity: attendees choose one of the case studies, sit at table with case study presenter, Q&A and then strategize about how to use this information to advance their work and talk about next steps (list the 2-3 questions that will be used for this activity). Include any preparation by attendees.

WRCF Model Questions

1. Will this buy-protect-sell transaction significantly affect traditional conservation easements in the area of the property?
2. Are land trusts or other conservation groups interested in this kind of model? Is there a way the model would work better for the organizations that would be using it?
3. Should the fund be financed by donations, or through investments? If the funds are invested, does a pooled income fund model work or make sense?

WWF Model Questions

1. Is there a consensus in the scientific community that changes in grazing practices can increase soil carbon to a level where carbon credits can be sold? Or is avoided conversion and restoration where the real impact is had?
2. What other markets could potentially be layered on top of carbon credits to make this model more profitable? Water quality with downstream municipalities paying for outcomes? Habitat credits for corporate partners looking to meet such a goal without an established protocol?
3. Are there investors or payors we aren't thinking of?
4. How can WWF use this approach to add on to existing efforts rather than creating another market pilot project and competing with them?

Grassland Carbon Questions

1. How might we align and communicate “natural climate solutions,” such as grassland carbon storage, with more traditional conservation approaches?
2. What obstacles exist for the generation and sale of carbon offsets in rural communities and how might we overcome these obstacles?
3. How might grassland carbon markets synergize other conservation models, such as the WRCF buy-protect-sell model, or the WWF impact fund model?
4. How does the timing of payment for offsets effect conservation outcomes (e.g., lump sum payments now, versus smaller but steady long-term cash flows)?

Technology & Materials:

Flip charts and pens

PPT slide

Bio of Host(s)/Facilitators and Case Study Presenters:

Presenters



Dr. Drew Bennett is the Whitney MacMillan Professor of Practice of Private Lands Stewardship in the Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources at the University of Wyoming. Drew's work focuses on strategies to balance agricultural production and the conservation of wildlife and other natural resources on private lands in the American West. He has previously worked with The Nature Conservancy on a cattle ranch in eastern Colorado, and for the Mesa Land Trust in western Colorado where he assisted landowners in exploring conservation opportunities for their land.



Travis Brammer is currently a law and master's student at the University of Wyoming and has been working with Dr. Bennett developing the Western Ranchland Conservation Fund model. Travis worked for the Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust for several years before coming back to law school in 2019. Travis grew up working on his family's farm and ranch operation in Northeastern Colorado and graduated from U.W. with his Bachelor's in 2016.



Claire Hood is a Specialist for World Wildlife Fund's Northern Great Plains Program. She is based in Bozeman, MT and serves as the Montana Representative for the Sustainable Ranching Initiative, a program that works with ranchers to conserve private grasslands in the Northern Great Plains. She spends much of her time driving around Montana, meeting with ranchers, and working with ranching communities to develop conservation strategies that benefit grasslands and people. Claire has been with WWF for over five years. Prior to working at WWF, Claire worked at U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.



Galen Guerrero-Murphy is a Land Conservation Program Manager for the Colorado Chapter of The Nature Conservancy. Galen leads land protection projects across the state, with an emphasis on ranchland conservation in southeast Colorado. As director of the emerging Southern High Plains Initiative, his strategic focus encompasses neighboring High Plains states and conservation finance more broadly. Galen is passionate about furthering landscape-scale conservation that benefits rural communities. He holds an MBA in Sustainability from Marlboro College, and a B.S. from Stanford University.