

## **Grassland Conservation through State Wildlife Agency Partnerships**

Conservation and management of grassland species and their habitats has generally been addressed in a fragmented approach through various recovery plans, conservation agreements, state management plans, or other planning documents. Actions associated with grassland conservation are often costly or inadequately funded across the landscape. In 2004, the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) recognized the need for a conservation focus on the grassland ecosystems because of past (agricultural conversion, infrastructure development, and urbanization) and current (invasive species, energy development, climate change and urban sprawl) impacts, and the under representation of this ecosystem in conservation areas. WAFWA directed its Habitat and Nongame and Endangered Species committees to use renewal of an MOU for black-tailed prairie dog conservation as a vehicle for beginning the transition toward an ecosystem conservation approach and to develop a cohesive, comprehensive, WAFWA prairie conservation strategy that integrates pertinent components of companion efforts for prairie dogs, black-footed ferret, swift and kit foxes, lesser prairie chicken, mountain plover, burrowing owl, ferruginous hawk, Swainson's hawk, loggerhead shrike, and, as appropriate and feasible, other shrub and grassland species. This effort became known as the WAFWA Grassland Initiative (WGI).

The WGI envisions through collaborative efforts:

1. There will be stabilization and conservation of healthy populations of species dependent upon grassland habitats resulting from increased focus on and commitment to action on common conservation needs of these species.
2. There will be increased public benefits resulting from multiple partners working together, sharing resources, and speaking with a united voice about the conservation and value of grasslands and associated wildlife species.
3. There will be increased funding to accomplish strategic actions as a result of increased political, social, and financial support from Initiative partners and collaborators. Our approach highlights increased coordination, action, and accountability.

Due to the success of the WGI effort, which included the removal of two species from the Federal candidate species list, WAFWA at their July 2015 summer meeting voted to extend the WGI effort to September 2020 under a MOU entitled The continuation of the Conservation and Management of Western Grassland Ecosystems and Species of Conservation Concern (MOU).