



SUSTAINABLE RANCHING INITIATIVE

2019 IMPACT REPORT



WWF NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS PROGRAM



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The Sustainable Ranching Initiative

The past year has been a big one for WWF's Sustainable Ranching Initiative (SRI). In Nebraska, we launched a new approach to transition planning that uses a long-term, hands on approach (pg. 6). In Montana, we began a sustainable beef pilot to test the sustainability framework developed by the US Roundtable for Sustainable Beef and increase supply chain traceability (pg. 7). The pilot is being led by our newest team member, Andrew Horvath, who joined the SRI team this year after working with ranchers in central Montana as a Big Sky Watershed Corps member.

Thanks to partnerships in the Northern Great Plains (NGP), we expanded our grassland bird surveys by 37% this year (for a total of 93 ranches surveyed since 2015)¹, adding participants from the ranching community in Montana, Nebraska, and South Dakota (pg. 2). To bring more attention to the good work ranchers are doing in the NGP, we helped launch the Leopold Conservation Award in Montana, which recognizes exemplary land stewards. We also launched "Rangelands Alive!", a storytelling series that showcases the rich biodiversity on working lands and the families who steward them (pg. 5).

As you all are aware, the weather over the past year has been challenging for some of our ranching partners. Parts of Nebraska and South Dakota have suffered through bomb cyclones and catastrophic flooding, and it has been unusually wet throughout much of the region. To help families in the face of such challenges, WWF sponsored a series of farm stress workshops in South Dakota. In the future, we will continue to support such efforts that address community resilience and conservation simultaneously.

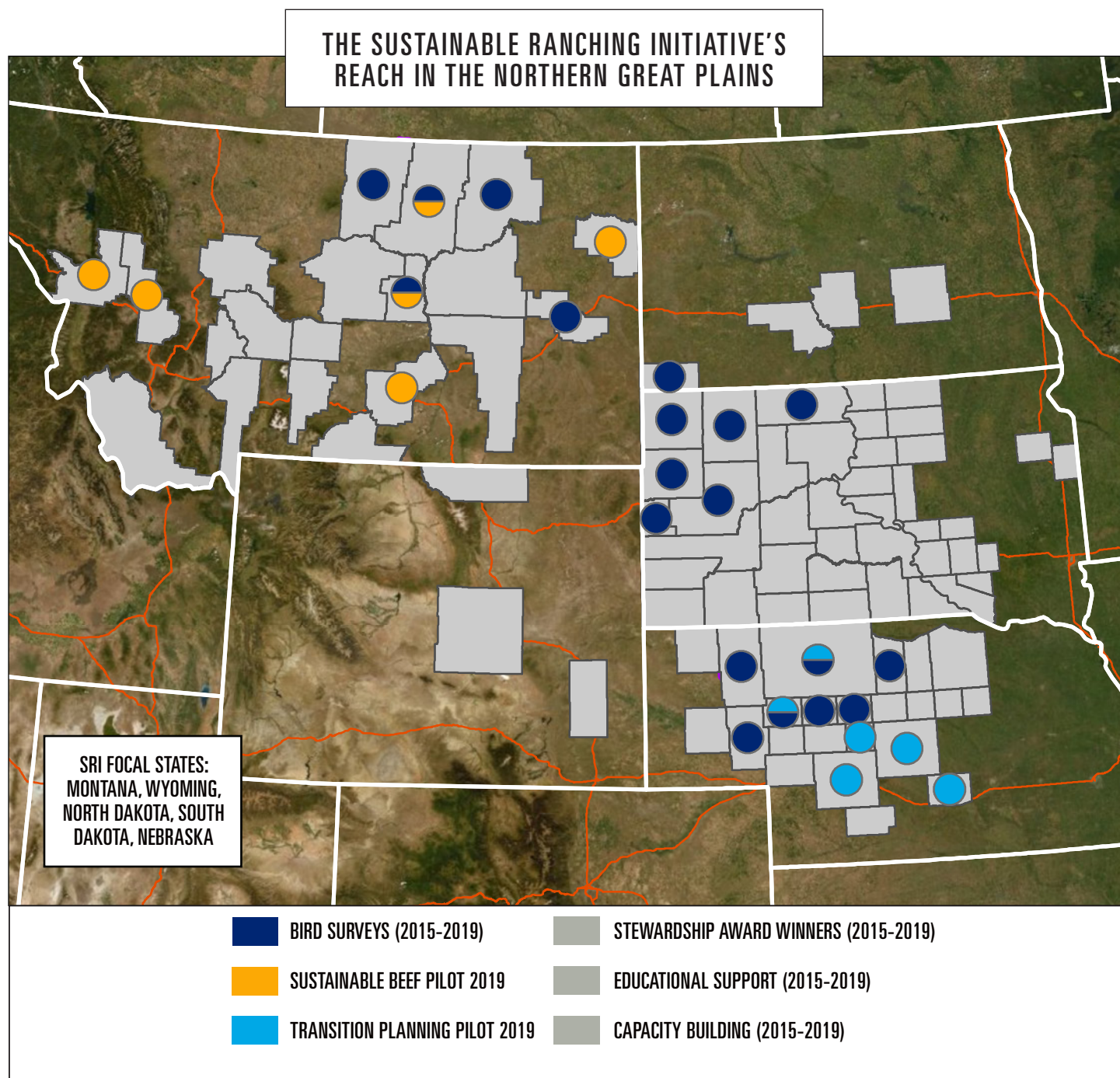
Nancy Labbe

Manager, Sustainable Ranching Initiative

WHERE WWF WORKS AND WHY

The NGP spans over 180 million acres across five US states and two Canadian provinces. WWF has prioritized this region because of its intact habitat and biodiversity. As with grasslands globally, the NGP is threatened by conversion to annual row crops. On average, the NGP has lost 1.5 million acres of grassland to conversion annually since 2009.*

The SRI's geographic focus is on 35 priority counties in the U.S. (an area covering almost 61 million acres), comprising the areas of highest species diversity and the most intact grasslands. Our initial engagement with ranchers has centered on 11 counties (over 22 million acres) in three focal areas: north-central Montana, northwestern South Dakota, and the Nebraska Sandhills.



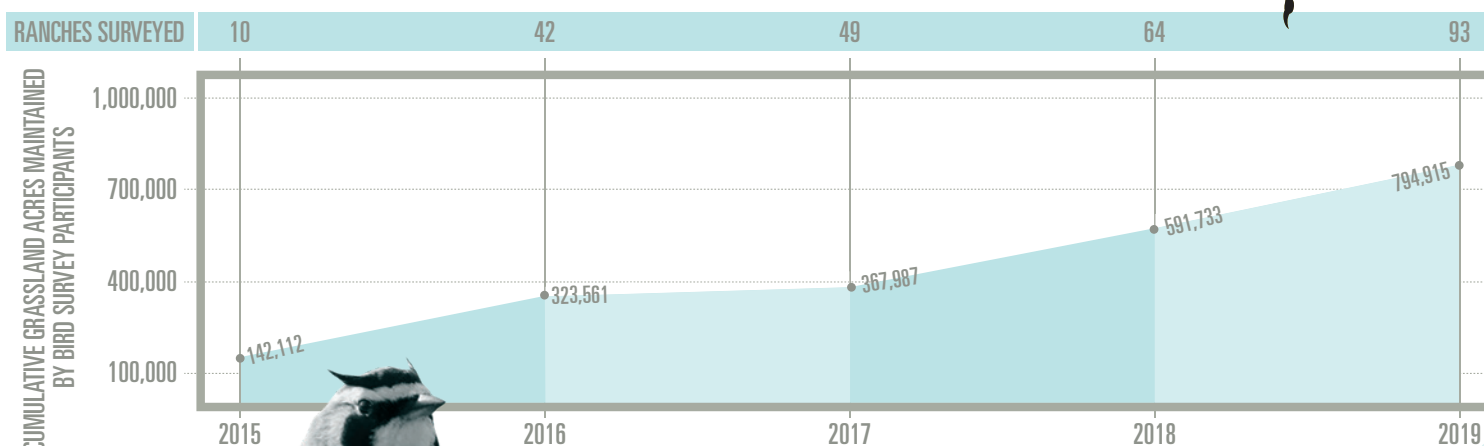
* This average is based on the 2018 Plowprint Report. Look for WWF's 2019 Plowprint Report in December 2019 for up-to-date information on conversion across the NGP.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

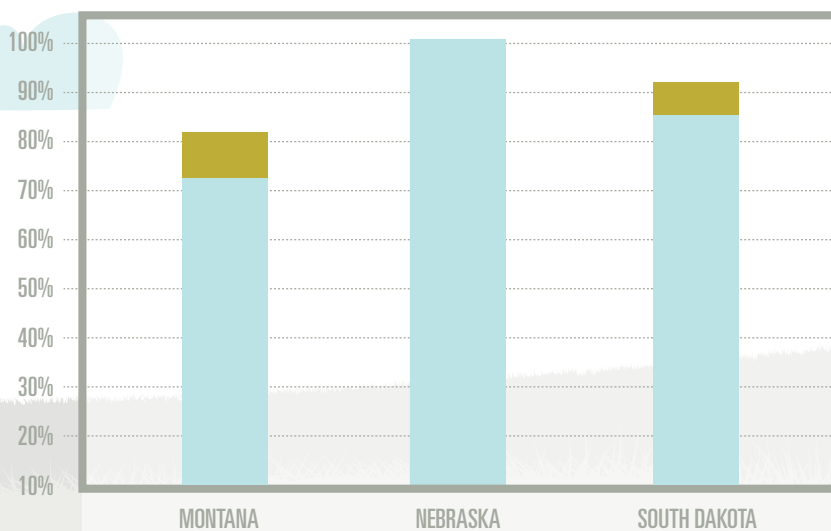
Grassland Bird Surveys

In 2015, WWF began ranch bird surveys to measure species diversity that occurs along with beef production. The surveys provide ranchers with knowledge about the grassland birds that depend on their lands and show them how bird communities are indicators of good management and ecosystem health. Since 2015, WWF has surveyed over 90 ranches that maintain over 790,000 acres of grassland and provide habitat for over 145 bird species and many other wildlife species.

Several ranchers are also using this information to enroll in programs such as Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances, Working Lands for Wildlife, or other WWF and partner programs. In 2020, WWF will create species-specific voluntary management recommendations for individual ranches to help improve populations of declining grassland birds.



■ % OF ACRES OF INTACT GRASS ■ % OF ACRES OF PERENNIAL COVER



This chart shows the land composition of the ranches participating in WWF's bird surveys. The vast majority of lands surveyed are intact grass, representing important habitat for grassland bird species. These numbers are based on the 2018 Plowprint Report.

"As sixth generation ranchers in western South Dakota we appreciate WWF's interest in conserving native prairies. WWF's bird counts showed 44 species of birds on our native rangeland. This helps us to know that our management is doing well for wildlife and the ecosystem and ensures that the land will be sustainable for generations to come."

RILEY & JIMMIE K
Bird Survey
Participants



Male and female Lark Buntings, Winnett, Montana

Conservation Roadshow

Over the last year, WWF and the Northern Great Plains Joint Venture traveled to 29 Conservation Districts and NRCS Service Centers and reached more than 500 people across the state of Montana as part of the Conservation Roadshow. The Roadshow's goal is to better target conservation dollars on the ground by sharing information with local agency staff and landowners in NGP counties about the amount of plow-up occurring in their county, areas for possible grassland restoration, and how intact grasslands contribute to grassland bird species populations. We shared information on management practices and decision tools that can help agency staff and landowners prioritize restoration efforts and direct conservation dollars for greatest conservation impact. We will continue to engage these Conservation Districts and NRCS Service Centers to help develop regional and county level conservation projects and plans. We're also in the process of expanding the Roadshow into North and South Dakota.

THE CONSERVATION ROADSHOW PROCESS

WWF is currently in the dialogue stage of working with agency staff and landowners.



DIALOGUE with agency staff and landowners about their needs, answer their questions, and provide information for developing conservation plans



LEVERAGE resources for local projects and plans at the county level (e.g., NRCS Targeted Implementation Plans)



DELIVER on the ground conservation projects that conserve and restore important habitat

**COMING
IN 2020**

NGP WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS GUIDE

For ranchers, wildlife can both positively and negatively affect their livelihoods. WWF is designing a guide with wildlife recommendations to help ranchers better understand the habitat needs of wildlife and provide some wildlife management strategies that could increase economic opportunities on their land. Stay tuned for updates on this project in 2020!

SOCIAL IMPACT

Transition Planning Pilot

The average age of producers in the US is now 57, and producers over 65 years outnumber those under 35 by more than 6 to 1. As older ranchers retire, the fate of their operations is often unknown, which puts their ranches at risk to be converted to cropland, subdivided, or increases the loss of knowledge of previous generations of managers.

In January, WWF partnered with the Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition to launch a new approach to transition planning in Nebraska. It centers on a transition facilitator who hosts workshops, works with ranchers to develop a transition “to-do” list, assists them in completing their transition plan, and provides support on other issues as they arise.

Since January 2019, 13 ranch families have enrolled in the pilot. While we had hoped to have more families enrolled by this point, transition planning is a difficult topic. Weather has been extreme, and it will take more time for ranchers to gain comfort and trust in the facilitator. WWF will host a Transition Experts Forum in December to bring transition attorneys, accountants, and financial planners from across the NGP together to discuss best practices for successful transition. WWF will analyze the results of the pilot in December and consider how to adapt our approach going forward.

Impact Through Pilot

3

workshops have been hosted by the facilitator so far

84

individuals have attended workshops so far

13

ranch families have begun working with the facilitator

100%

of workshop attendees say they are “likely” or “very likely” to start or resume a transition plan

25

ranch families have expressed interest in working with the facilitator

2019 GOAL
20 FAMILIES

13 FAMILIES
CURRENTLY
ENROLLED
IN PILOT

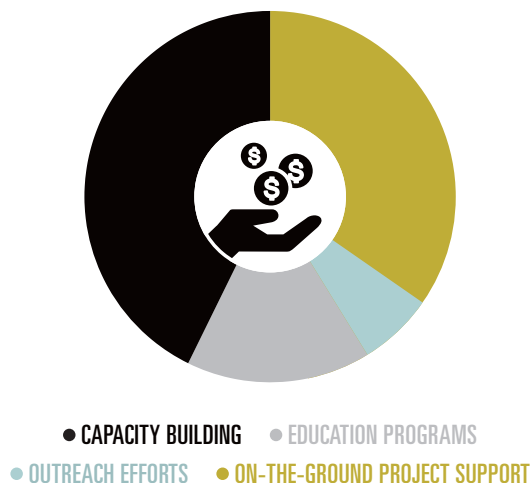
Nebraska rancher, Ryan Sexson

WWF's Community Resilience Work

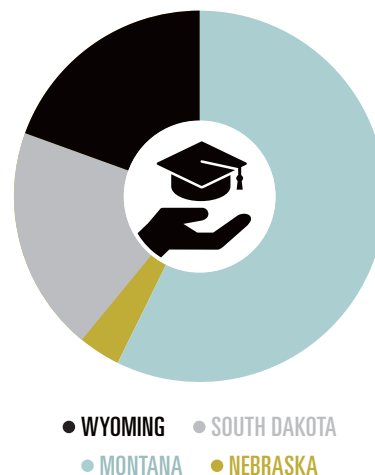
Resilience is defined as the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties. WWF invests in ranchers and rancher-led groups to better facilitate the development of local solutions and help make rural communities and the grasslands they manage more resilient. Since 2014, WWF has supported ranchers across the region through capacity-building grants (for hiring staff, developing a website, creating a strategic plan, etc.) and educational events (holistic management workshops, Ranching for Profit schools, soil health tours, etc.).

To date WWF's community resilience efforts have provided \$360,000 in targeted support to ranching communities and impacted or influenced over **1.5 million acres**. This targeted support has included capacity-building grants, support for local outreach on grazing management, education programs, and matching funds for projects to do on the ground conservation work. Going forward, WWF will work with ranching partners to implement locally developed solutions and conserve wildlife habitat, through measures such as agricultural land trusts and local outreach efforts around management practices.

Total Support for Community Resilience Work by Project Type Since 2014



People Reached Through Education Support by State Since 2014



\$360,734

total dollars spent on community resilience since 2014



8 positions supported by WWF in rural communities across the NGP since 2014



\$1,643,498

total dollars leveraged by grantees and positions supported by WWF



2,315

total individuals reached through education support since 2014



54 total education events supported since 2014



\$84,700

total dollars spent on education support since 2014

“The NGP Sustainable Beef Pilot is a good opportunity for ranchers to learn about their cattle and the beef industry. The knowledge will help their ranches become more sustainable and profitable.”

DALE VESETH
*Montana Rancher
and Pilot Participant*



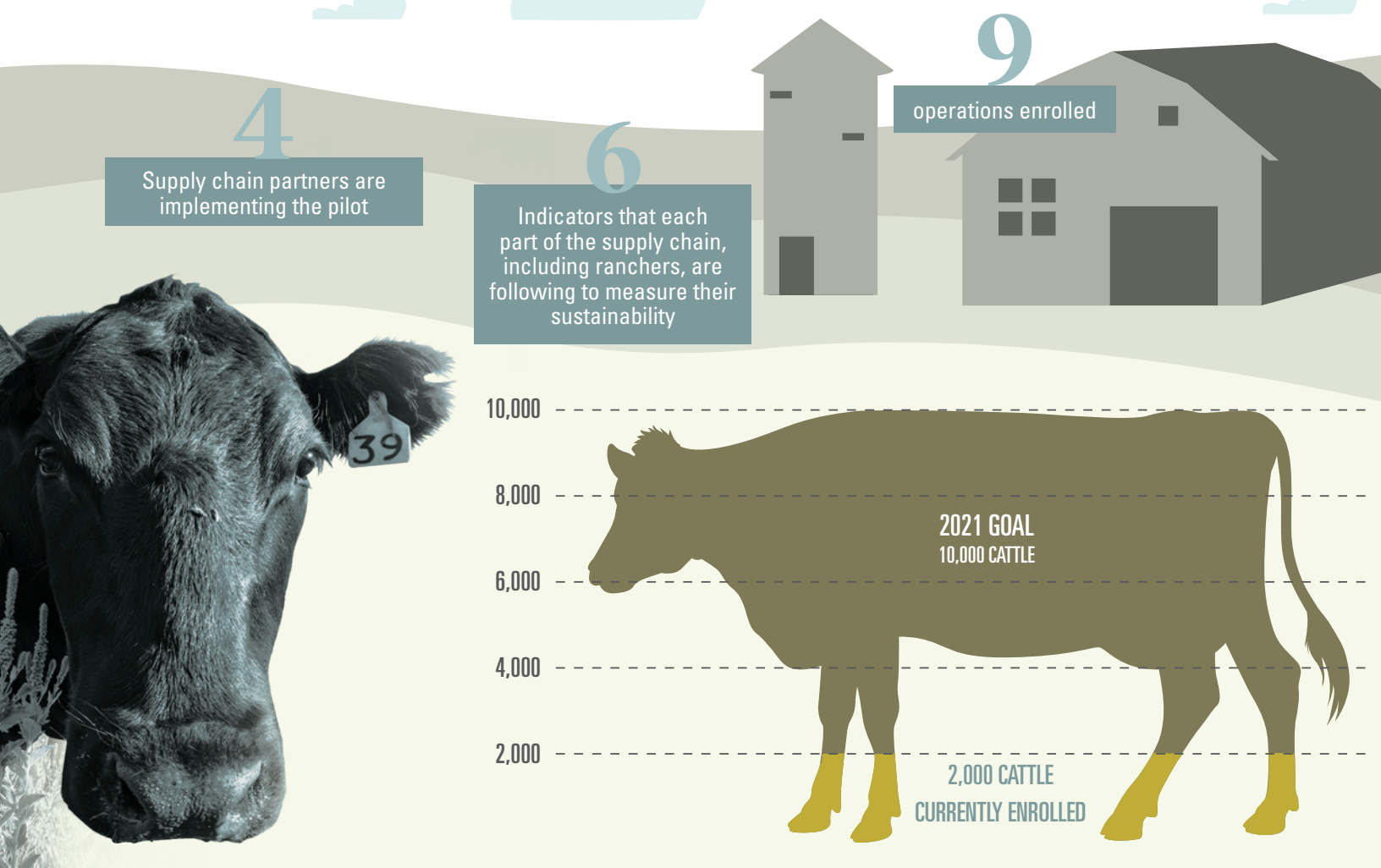
ECONOMIC IMPACT

Northern Great Plains Sustainable Beef Pilot

More consumers are interested in where their food comes from and how it is raised.

In 2019, WWF partnered with Costco Wholesale, Hy-Plains Feedyard, JBS USA, and Montana Stockgrowers Association to launch the Northern Great Plains Sustainable Beef Pilot in Montana. The pilot is in early stages and hopes to trace sustainable beef production throughout the supply chain, quantify the environmental, social, and economic impacts of ranching in the NGP, and communicate the value of ranching to consumers. Participating ranchers will conduct an annual self-assessment that will identify key areas for improvement around six indicators, including land resources, water resources, and air and greenhouse gases. WWF plans to include tools and resources for improving different practices under these six indicators in 2020.

Outcomes of this pilot will include greater transparency in the beef supply chain that will be communicated to consumers in hopes that it will lead to increased trust between consumers and ranchers. Over the next couple of years, we will seek feedback from participants so that we can refine the pilot and replicate it in other states within the NGP.

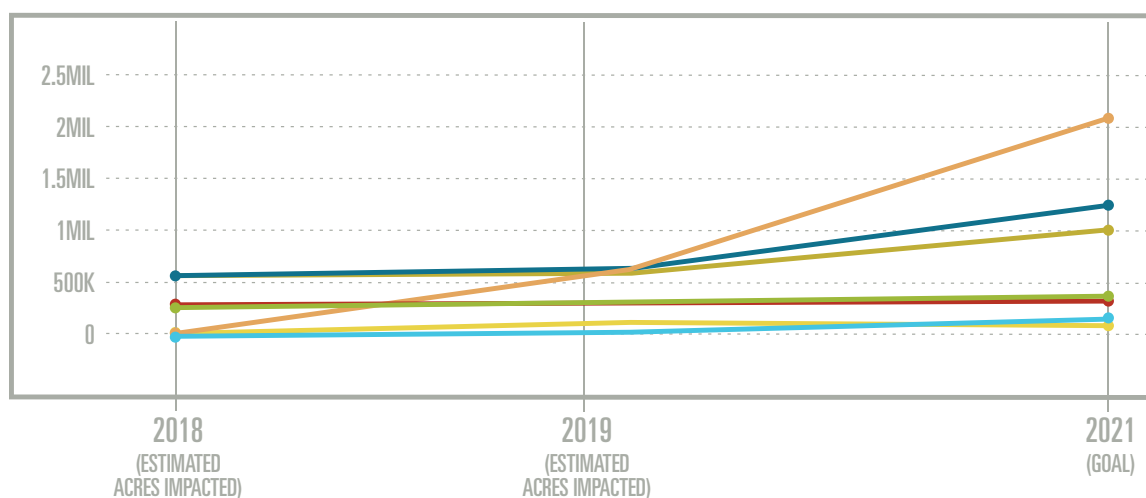


**COMING
IN 2020**

IMPACT INVESTING IN THE NGP

The SRI has partnered with Quantified Ventures, an impact investing advisory firm, to determine the feasibility of developing an outcome-based financing tool that incentivizes grassland conservation. Stay tuned for updates on this project in 2020!

Cumulative Acres Impacted Since 2015



IMPACTED ACRES TOTALS

2019 (ACTUAL)
3,040,276

2021 (ESTIMATED)
5,389,650

- GRASSLAND BIRD SURVEYS
- TRANSITION PLANNING PILOT
- PARTICIPATION IN SUPPLY CHAIN ROUNDTABLES
- CAPACITY BUILDING GRANTS
- RANCHER EDUCATION
- SUPPORT OF STEWARDSHIP AWARDS
- ON THE GROUND PROJECT SUPPORT

TELLING RANCHERS' STORIES

2019 has been an exciting year for SRI communications! We are proud to introduce Rangelands Alive!, a new journalistic series highlighting working lands in the Northern Great Plains, the families that manage them, and the abundance of wildlife that live within these grasslands. New stories can be found regularly at www.rangelandsalive.org. The SRI will also be the subject of a feature article in the Fall 2019 issue of World Wildlife Magazine. The images that follow are a selection of the photos that were all shot on working lands across the Northern Great Plains.



Dickcissel singing, Lowry, South Dakota



Mule deer doe and fawn, Malta, Montana



Sweat bee, Lowry, South Dakota



Monarch butterfly on swamp milkweed, Scenic, South Dakota.



Ornate box turtle, Cody, Nebraska



Female yellow-headed blackbird, Three Forks, Montana



Festive tiger beetle, Cody, Nebraska



Front cover:
Brady Ranch, Winnett, Montana

Back cover:
Grasshopper Sparrow, Cody, Nebraska

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