

Local Listening Session Summary Flint Hills Core Region

The Kansas Department of Agriculture held four local listening sessions across the state in October 2025. KDA surveyed ranchers and landowners about their ideas to improve and conserve private working grasslands in Kansas. The information and feedback helped shape and create an Issue Brief, a report about the state of Kansas grasslands with action steps to encourage and support the enhanced conservation of these working lands in our state.

KDA worked with the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts on the project, with support from the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Local ranchers in four of the state's core grassland regions helped inform and invite participants to the meetings. The Smoky Hills meeting took place at the Chase County Community Building in Cottonwood Falls on October 29. Fifteen ranchers and landowners were placed in two small groups for the input sessions.

The goal was to better understand both regional opportunities and challenges as well as efforts that could be made at the state level. The resulting report, as well as summaries of the notes from the other October in-person meetings and the statewide online survey, can be accessed at www.agriculture.ks.gov/grasslands

The following are the top issues and themes that emerged during the listening session in Cottonwood Falls.

Hunting and Recreation

- Several ranchers asked: Are hunters paying enough for permits for what they're getting?
 - What is the primary use of land when it's assessed for taxes — recreation or agriculture?
 - A suggestion was made that the state needs to "dollarize" hunting cost — quantify economic activity relative to hunting so it can be compared more easily to the economic activity of the agriculture sector.
 - Suggestions were made to review the state's deer hunting permitting process with an eye toward loopholes and consistent enforcement, particularly in the non-resident deer tag category.

Funding

- Research:
 - Continue funding programs and projects that conduct research on ecological benefits of grasslands.
 - Study control methods for Old World Bluestem.
- Fire departments
 - Find more state resources to support local, rural fire departments to assist with prescribed burning and fire control measures.
- Funding for grants/programs

- Continue to fund start-up or beginning farming and ranching projects... but don't discount the "generational" or existing operations facing similar cash-flow challenges.

Prescribed burning

- The Flint Hills Smoke Management plan is considered to be successful.
 - The public seems more understanding of smoke generated from prescribed burns.
 - There's still interest in increasing flexibility in air quality regulations.

State government

- The state could set a better example in grasslands management by addressing woody encroachment on public lands.
- There's concern about Old World Bluestem and other invasive grasses spreading into working grasslands from state highway rights of way.

Sense of community

- There's a strong sense of community in the Flint Hills region, and people who live and work there are proud of their shared identity.
- However, there's concern about out-of-county ownership. One rancher cited a study that found that 70% of the land in Chase County falls into that category.

Education and promotion

- Find new partnerships to improve and enhance K-12 education opportunities.
- Build on previous efforts for education and promotion like the Symphony in the Flint Hills.

Optimism for the future

- There was a recognition that both foresight and action would be important to preserving the region's grasslands.
 - "We just need to be thinking about what this will look like in 40 years and do something about it today."
 - "We've got a lot of opportunities — we need to figure out how to take advantage of them."