

## Local Listening Session Summary Smoky 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 Grant Township Community Building in Wells on October 28. Seventeen 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. Below is a summary of the meeting that took place in Wells. 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](http://www.agriculture.ks.gov/grasslands)

Top themes from the listening session included:

- The general public should be more aware of grasslands.
  - Awareness could mean more funding for programs, especially those that could provide more equipment to address challenges like tree and brush removal and provide for contractual services.
- “The people who need to know aren’t here at the table.”
  - There is a concern about reaching absentee landowners, particularly those with recreational interests, when it comes to addressing tree and brush maintenance efforts.
- There’s a need for an “identity” of the Smoky Hills region — like the Flint Hills.
- Fragmentation of grasslands is a concern.
  - In the Smoky Hills, there’s a mix of land uses — grazing, row crop farming, recreational.
  - It takes more effort here to maintain grasslands because they are fragmented by neighboring farms and homes.
- “(Pro-)tree messaging in urban areas leads to Callery Pears in pastures.”
  - Other invasive trees of concern: siberian elms, eastern red cedar windbreaks, russian olives.
- Burning is the most low-cost, effective way to manage brush/trees.
  - Public land isn’t considered to be well-managed.
    - Railroads
    - County roads
    - State rights of ways

- It's too expensive, not enough labor
  - Management that relies on minimal costs, minimal effort (prescribed burning) isn't widely used.
    - Not as much buy-in, yet
    - New PBAs are helping
- General approval of programs that address grasslands.
  - Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Great Plains Grasslands Initiative are helping land managers.
  - There are reported challenges with logistics and timing constraints.
    - Cost share doesn't always reward proactive producers.
    - Looking for flexibility in GPGI — not "one size fits all."
- There are challenges with invasive species — especially Old World Bluestems
  - It was planted in state rights of way (ditches) and seeds are spread to nearby grasslands when it's mowed. Awareness is good, control is difficult.
    - Research and development on control may especially be too niche for significant research dollars to be invested.
  - Old World Bluestem is "the next largest threat."
    - Still being planted by some producers for hay.
  - Late summer/early fall back burning may be helpful to encourage native grass growth.
- There is a wish that more people understood that once grasslands are gone, they are not coming back.
- "Maintaining the grasslands isn't a seasonal project. It's a 12-month commitment."
- There's a recognition of private investment in clearing brush and trees outside of government programs.
- There was general support for organizations at the state level that intersect with grasslands.