

KANSAS GRASSLANDS Issue Brief



2026



A joint project of the Kansas Department of Agriculture and
the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts

Acknowledgements

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INTRODUCTION

Grasslands are a critically important, yet often overlooked, natural resource in Kansas.

Approximately 30% of the state is classified as native grasslands. These 15.8 million acres¹ support the state's beef cattle industry; help protect water quality, streamflow and storage; prevent erosion; help reduce the risk of wildfires; store carbon in deep root systems below ground; support pollinators; provide wildlife habitat; and are considered one of the most diverse ecosystems on the planet. An additional 3 million acres of pasture — grasslands containing tame grass for grazing — also provide environmental benefits to water, soil and carbon storage.

Despite their productivity, Kansas grasslands are among the least protected large-scale natural systems — and they are disappearing at an alarming rate. Plowing grasslands to grow row crops like corn, wheat, soybeans and grain sorghum, and, increasingly, a rapid expansion of invasive trees, brush and non-native grass species are reducing hundreds of thousands of acres of grasslands each year.

“If you do good conservation, you have good production.” – Gypsum Hills rancher

Trees are an important part of our state's ecosystem, providing benefits that include important shade for both urban and rural homes, wind protection for livestock, and the environmental and economic benefits of natural forested areas. However, most species have traditionally not had a home on the prairie. Removing trees that have migrated into grasslands by seeds spread on the wind and by wildlife is increasingly causing challenges of time, cost and labor for ranchers. The encroachment of these invasive woody species into grasslands also

increases the risk of devastating wildfires and reduces the number of acres available for grazing cattle, and, long-term, it could lead to a smaller Kansas beef herd, less beef cattle industry revenue, and increased costs for consumers.

Roughly 98% of Kansas' native grasslands are privately owned. The state's landowners and land managers play a critical role in protecting and conserving this resource, and their efforts are critical to ensuring that the state's grazing lands remain an asset for future generations.

“We just need to be thinking about what this will look like in 40 years and do something about it today.” – Flint Hills rancher

The Kansas Department of Agriculture and the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts worked with the state's ranching and conservation communities in 2025 to identify immediate, short-term action steps to encourage and support enhanced conservation of private working grasslands. This report is an output of the project, and it includes current information, scientific knowledge, and practical next steps informed by rancher-led focus groups and peer review. It's also a resource for anyone new to learning about this critically important resource.

“In the end, we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught.” – Baba Dioum, Senegalese forestry specialist and conservationist, as quoted by a Kansas rancher

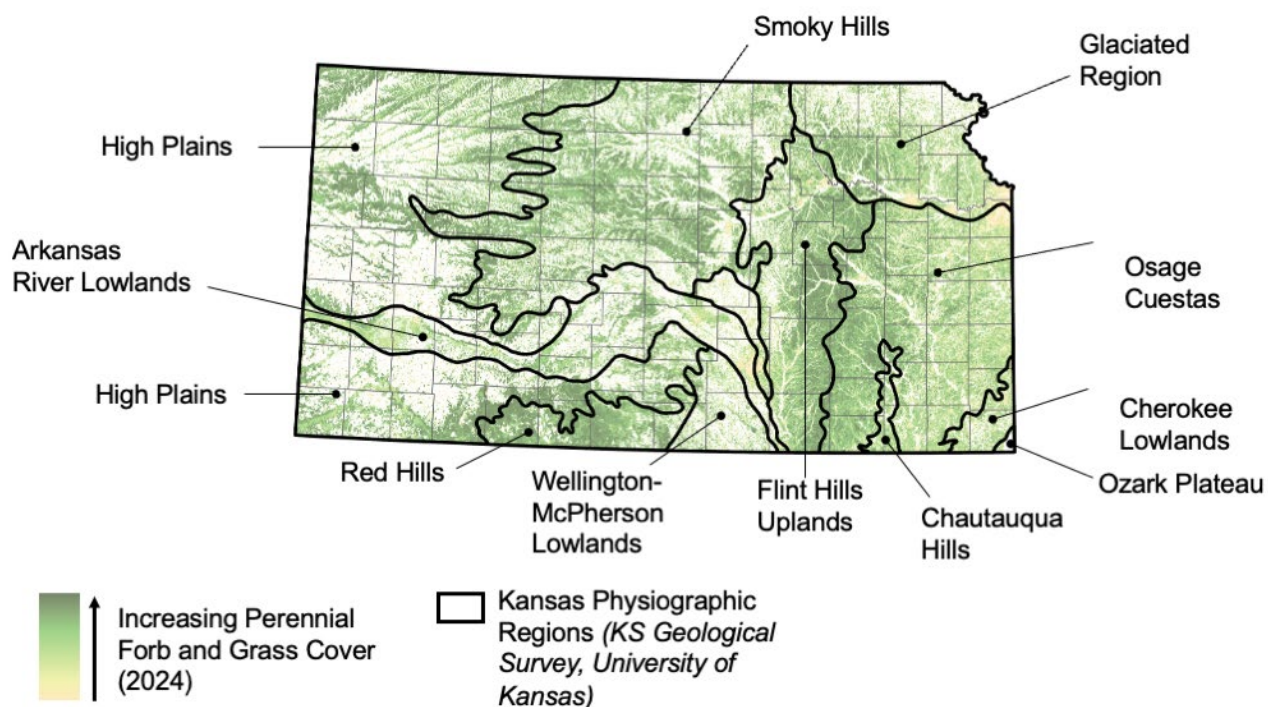
GRASSLANDS IN KANSAS

Grasslands are found throughout Kansas — in each corner and all points in between.

Kansas is home to three main types of grasslands² that generally correspond to the amount of precipitation each region receives³. In the eastern third of the state, native prairie grasses found in the Flint Hills include tallgrass species like big bluestem, indiangrass, switchgrass, and little bluestem.

The western third of the state is drier, lending itself to a shortgrass prairie where blue grama and buffalograss are prevalent. Accordingly, grasslands in the central third are generally known as “mixed-grass” prairie with a combination of tall and short grasses. In all of these regions, there are other categories of plants known as forbs — herbaceous plants that are neither grasses nor trees. These grasses and forbs are important to their local ecosystem as well as to maintaining quality pasture for livestock.

Ecoregions of Kansas



This 2024 map displays the location of perennial grasses and forbs as related to the state’s physiographic regions. Source: Kansas Geological Survey, University of Kansas, and perennial forb and grass cover from the Rangeland Analysis Platform.

How are grasslands used?

“Grazing lands,” “rangelands” or “pasturelands” often refer to grasslands where animals graze. According to the 2022 U.S. Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service Census of Agriculture, Kansas had about 14.67 million acres classified as pastureland. Historically, bison were the prominent grazers along with other herbivores such as elk and pronghorn; today, we primarily see cattle in the pastures along with sheep and goats. The animals eat plants that can compete with native species, helping strengthen the health of the native prairie. A 3-foot by 3-foot area of tallgrass prairie grazed by bison or cattle can easily contain 30 to 40 plant species.

“Grass was meant to be grazed.”
– High Plains rancher

Additionally, grasslands are used for conservation purposes. The federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), administered by the USDA Farm Services Agency, provides incentive payments to landowners who agree to improve vegetation and wildlife habitat⁴ and encourage the growth of native species — particularly on land susceptible to erosion or other environmental concerns.

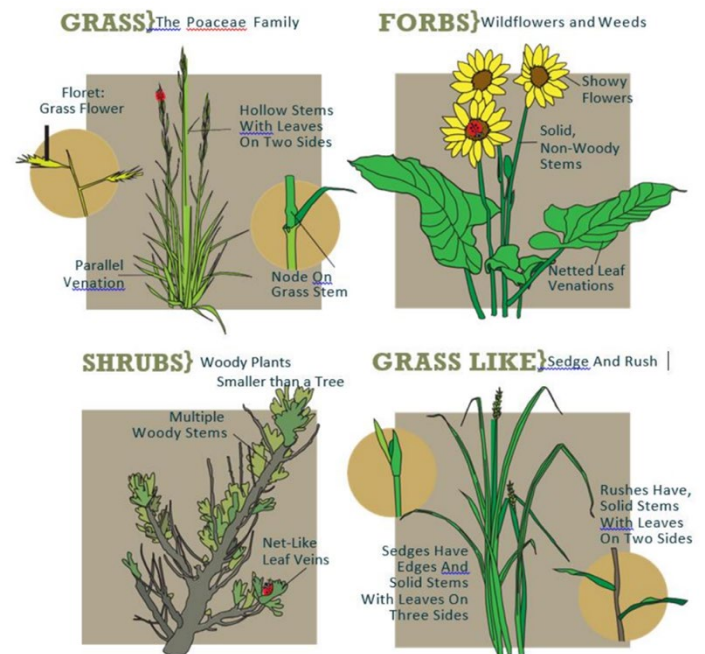
Aside from producing forage for beef production, managing wildlife habitat is one of the most discussed topics of grasslands management in Kansas. Grasslands that are rich in native plant species and maintained by fire and grazing provide an important habitat for upland game birds, including ring-necked pheasant, northern bobwhite quail, and prairie chickens. Big game species such as mule deer, white-tailed deer and pronghorn also depend on the prairie for habitat.

Ownership

In Kansas, and in many other states east of the continental divide, the health of grasslands depends on working with private property owners taking on the role of private stewardship of the land. In addition to maintaining the relatively small portion of land that is in parks, preserves and public rights of way, government entities primarily assist conservation in these states by promoting sound management activities so that private landowners, ranchers, and farmers can maintain their land for future generations. Non-government organizations, such as the Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition and the Kansas Forage and Grassland Council, further assist landowners and ranchers with educational opportunities and technical assistance.

County governments intersect with these landowners through local emergency management oversight of controlled burning and through county weed departments charged with controlling noxious weeds. Counties also may be landowners who face similar issues of controlling woody species encroachment and invasive plants in rights of way and public spaces.

What’s in a “grassland”?



Grasslands aren’t just grass, but diverse habitats that include many different types of plants. This graphic, used with permission from the Idaho Rangeland Resources Commission, shows four of these types.

Ranchers and landowners may choose to enroll in voluntary programs that provide financial assistance for conservation practices to defend against woody species encroachment. The Environment Quality Incentives Program administered by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service can provide resources to ranchers to remove trees and brush from rangeland. NRCS has also endorsed the Great Plains Grassland Initiative⁵ approach in Kansas, using EQIP program funds in targeted “core” grassland areas to amplify efforts to combat woody species encroachment.

“You can’t do something if it’s gonna break you.” – High Plains rancher

Local conservation districts — one in each of the state’s 105 counties — also provide technical assistance and facilitate State of Kansas cost-share programs to help producers adopt best management practices such as prescribed burning and managed grazing to improve their grasslands and promote soil health.

Although much smaller in acreage, public lands and conserved grasslands (owned and/or managed by state or federal agencies, research stations, or non-governmental organizations) represent important “anchor” habitats. The most notable of these public lands in Kansas are the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in northern Chase County and the sand sage prairie of the Cimarron National Grassland in Morton County. Kansas also has protected areas, like the Smoky Valley Ranch in Logan County, owned by The Nature Conservancy, and university sites like the Konza Prairie Biological Station south of Manhattan, a biological research station jointly owned by Kansas State University and The Nature Conservancy⁶.

“We live in a world of relationships and experiences now, not graphs and charts.”
– Flint Hills rancher

While the total acreage of public grassland in Kansas is small relative to private holdings, these public parcels serve critical roles. They have the potential to act as testing grounds for ecological research, demonstration sites for fire/grazing practices, seed sources for native vegetation, and source populations for grassland-dependent species. They also provide public recreation and education opportunities, which help raise awareness and support for grassland conservation.



Prescribed fire is used to preserve grazing lands for livestock.

Management

In addition to grazing animals, fire has historically been used in native and modern cultures to promote native plant species and manage invasive trees and brush in Kansas grasslands — but its use varies across the state. The concern about the encroachment of these woody species into grasslands is growing, as research estimates indicate that Kansas is losing 1.9 billion pounds of forage each year from the increase in invasive woody trees and brush, the equivalent to 1.6 million round bales of hay⁷.

Ranchers use prescribed burning — a planned event that’s often part of a long-term management plan — to remove or prevent small trees and brush and other invasive species before they establish deep roots. These fires encourage and support native prairie grasses and plants, discourage the establishment of woody invasive species, and remove fuel that can exacerbate the intensity of unplanned, unpredictable wildfires.

***“The ‘natural look’ isn’t natural.”
– Gypsum Hills rancher***

Various factors contribute to the decision of when a pasture is burned, including weather, availability of labor and controlled burn equipment, and whether ranchers need to use it for grazing animals. In the Flint Hills, where range burning is perhaps most visible, ranchers may access the region’s smoke management plan and online decision-making model to help determine the ideal times to burn their pastures that minimize smoke drifting into the state’s urban areas. The local culture of pasture burning in this region brings together neighbors, ranchers, land managers, and other public and private partners to ensure adequate burning can occur without negatively impacting neighboring pastures, rural landowners, and air quality.

In other parts of the state, where the use of prescribed fire has been less prevalent, Prescribed Burn Associations have formed to help ranchers develop local, voluntary partnerships to help with labor needs and availability of fire suppression equipment. These associations can help address challenges that may be related to local issues by encouraging landowners to develop a prescribed burn plan that guides the landowner to implement a safe and effective burn.

“We can’t even clean up along our property lines because of the liability of burning or spraying too close to the neighbors’ property line.” – Flint Hills rancher

Prescribed burning⁸ is the most natural and cost-effective way to remove and prevent brush and trees in grasslands. Researchers note that using mechanical and chemical methods alone, without the use of prescribed fire, has not halted woody expansion on a large scale. Even in areas where prescribed fires have been used regularly, ranchers report that they are having to burn more frequently to prevent invasive woody plant expansion. Otherwise, ranchers and landowners

There can be different points of view when it comes to managing trees and brush in grasslands. Some hunters, for instance, value increased tree and brush cover as presumed habitat for deer and game birds. The manager of a neighboring property may be working to eradicate the same trees and brush species in order to optimize their pasture for grazing beef cattle. The two approaches, in close proximity, can be contentious, especially if a landowner has no management plan, which allows their land to be overgrown with invasive species that have questionable value for native wildlife. Some academic institutions and hunter advocacy groups are studying and promoting the use of prairie burning and other methods to manage cedar trees to optimize habitats for deer and game birds.

must use mechanical and chemical methods to remove unwanted trees. Mechanical methods are labor-intensive, expensive, and can be more dangerous than people think, as well as carrying increased social and environmental liability.

***“It’s not just a season... it’s a 12-month project. You have to do it (the maintenance) every month of the year.”
– Smoky Hills rancher***

In addition to trees and brush, invasive grasses and plants such as Old World Bluestem and sericea lespedeza can reduce the health, plant community diversity, and grazing value of native prairies. These invasive, non-native species can spread rapidly from ditches and nearby fields.

Support for Kansas Grasslands

Although the state's grasslands are primarily held by private landowners, there are organizations, agencies and institutions that support ranchers and landowners to improve and conserve grasslands in Kansas.

Non-Governmental Organizations: There are many natural resources focused NGOs that provide technical/financial assistance, training and support for landowners in protecting and improving their range resources through implementation of sound conservation practices.

Kansas ranchers and landowners surveyed for this project in 2025 were asked to share the organizations and agencies that they believed were making a difference in advocacy, education and support for Kansas grasslands.

These are the top 10 organizations they named in survey responses:

- Kansas Livestock Association
- Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition
- Tallgrass Legacy Alliance
- The Nature Conservancy
- Prescribed Burn Associations
- Ranchland Trust of Kansas
- Pheasants Forever / Quail Forever
- Kansas Farm Bureau
- Ducks Unlimited
- Kansas Association of Conservation Districts

NGOs like Ranchland Trust of Kansas, The Nature Conservancy and Kansas Land Trust also work with landowners to develop voluntary agricultural conservation easements to conserve grasslands.

Governmental Agencies: The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service has a strong presence at the state and regional level with

producers working to improve and maintain grasslands. They provide technical and financial assistance to ranchers and landowners. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service works in Kansas to oversee the protection of federally designated at-risk, threatened and endangered species and through the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program to conserve and protect grasslands. The National Park Service manages the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve and the U.S. Forest Service manages the Cimarron National Grassland.

At the state level, the Division of Conservation in the Kansas Department of Agriculture provides cost-share funding administered through local conservation district offices. Those county-level offices also work with producers on grasslands conservation efforts. The Kansas Forest Service has resources focused on reducing the risk of wildfires, provides support for Prescribed Burn Associations, and administers a program that moves surplus governmental firefighting equipment to local agencies and associations. The Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks also offers information to landowners who manage grasslands for wildlife habitats.

Academic Institutions: Universities in Kansas, Nebraska and Oklahoma provide research and technical assistance related to Kansas grasslands. Kansas State University has many projects and programs in the field, including agricultural economics, biology, technology, range management, agricultural communications, agronomy, and animal and plant sciences, as well as joint ownership with The Nature Conservancy of the Konza Prairie Biological Station. With about 2,200 scientific publications on tallgrass prairie, the Konza Prairie is the most studied grassland site in the world. Kansas State University Extension provides technical assistance for ranchers and landowners on topics such as water, controlling noxious weeds and invasive species, and other soil and livestock resources.

The University of Kansas has a number of programs and areas of study for Kansas grasslands, including housing the Kansas Biological Survey & Center

for Ecological Research, which conducts research and mapping of the state’s natural resources, and the Kansas Geological Survey, which conducts research on groundwater and surface water. Emporia State University, Wichita State University and Fort Hays State University also participate in research projects for the state’s grasslands.

Regionally, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Oklahoma State University also provide technical assistance, research and support to grasslands conservation efforts in Kansas.



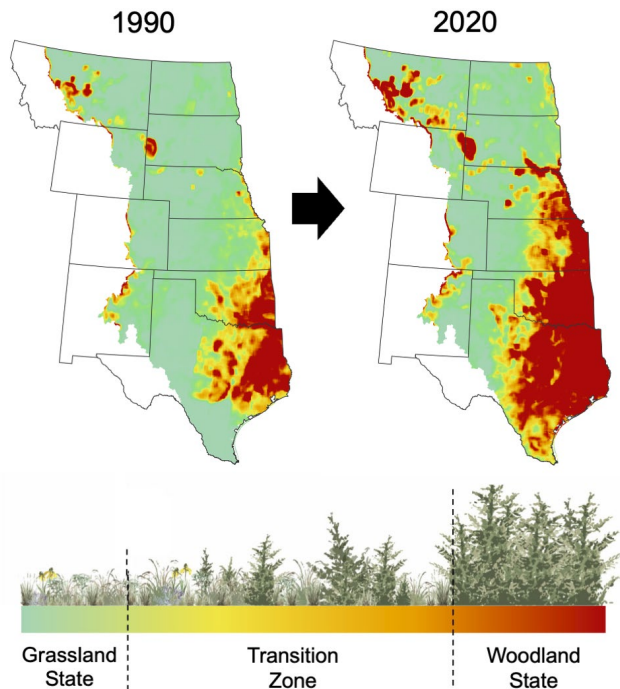
Fire is a common management practice for grasslands in the Kansas Flint Hills.

THE LOSS OF KANSAS GRASSLANDS WILL LEAD TO SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES

Kansas is losing thousands of acres of grasslands each year. Whether from invasive trees, brush and non-native grasses and plants encroaching on the prairie, or from conversion to cropland, the state's long-time natural resource that provides economic and ecological benefits is at risk.

"I think we're closer to losing the Flint Hills than we realize." – Flint Hills rancher

Spread of Woody Encroachment



This graphic shows the increase in trees and brush found across the Great Plains region over a span of 20 years. Source: Twidwell Lab, University of Nebraska

than 70 years may further complicate the ability of young farmers and ranchers to rebuild the herd when market conditions are more favorable.

Lower profitability and less opportunity for future ranchers

The beef cattle industry is Kansas' largest agriculture sector. As of early 2025, Kansas held nearly 6 million cattle⁹, many of which originated from or are using grasslands. Fewer acres of grassland will have economic consequences, including reduced farm/ranch revenue and lower agricultural use value of land.

According to data shared by the Great Plains Grasslands Extension Partnership, the 1.9 billion pounds of missing grass lost to woody species encroachment equates to enough feed for 157,000 head of cows eating for an entire year¹⁰.

Degraded land impacts not only the rancher, but also local and state tax bases; ranchers also face higher maintenance costs for removing trees and the need for additional labor for prescribed burns and maintenance.

A reduction in acres also makes it more difficult for beginning ranchers to access and afford pastureland — and recent market dynamics that have reduced the United States cow herd to the smallest number it has been in more

"If you're a young person and you get a chance to buy a quarter (section), you may be overleveraged already, and it may be hard for you." – Smoky Hills rancher

“A rural fire department can usually address a wildfire. They’re not equipped for a forest fire.” – Gypsum Hills rancher

Increased risks of wildfire

The encroachment of volatile woody trees and brush has been identified as a leading driver of an increased wildfire risk. As outlined in the final report of the Kansas Governor’s Wildfire Task Force, released in 2023, species such as eastern red cedar can increase volatile fuel loads, fire temperature, flame length, and spot-fire distance — all of which contribute to a higher degree of wildfire danger.

Local volunteer fire departments can quickly become overwhelmed by large fires, and communities bear the expenses associated with fire response and recovery — expenses that can outpace the costs of fire suppression and prevention methods.

Declines in water quality and quantity

Studies conducted on the tallgrass prairie at the Konza Prairie Biological Station indicate that intact native grasslands provide specific benefits for water quantity and water quality, all of which are at risk when the prairie is lost¹¹:

- Greater plant water-use efficiency¹²
- Increased water storage in the soil¹³
- Improved base flow in nearby streams¹⁴
- Reduced loss of sediment and nutrients¹⁵

All of these factors have impacts on grassland resilience during a drought, stocking rates, access to water and streamflow for downstream water users, and the cost for rural residents and downstream municipalities to ensure their drinking water meets clean water standards.

“Everyone who drinks water or breathes air needs to be aware of the role of grasslands.”
– Gypsum Hills rancher

Loss of a complex and increasingly rare biome

Only a few large, intact grasslands remain in the world¹⁶ — one of which is the Flint Hills of Kansas — making them increasingly and critically important for conservation approaches. Grasslands support a wide range of species of plants, insects, and wildlife that are found in abundance in our prairies, such as compass plant, echinacea, gayfeather, leadplant, katydid, and western meadowlarks.

There are about 650 wildlife species in Kansas, according to the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks’ State Wildlife Action Plan — and that’s not counting thousands of invertebrates or aquatic species that rely on prairie wetlands and streams. Because Kansas was historically about 90% prairie¹⁷, nearly all of these native wildlife species rely on grasslands.

Due to its geographic location, Kansas grasslands are tied to mass migrations that help knit together species across North America, with Kansas playing an especially important role in the migration of recognizable insects and birds, such as monarch butterflies and upland sandpipers. The grasslands of the state provide habitat for a diverse range of vulnerable, threatened and endangered species, and Kansas has managed to avoid increased regulation for many of these species by showing the voluntary efforts that our ranchers and landowners have engaged in to conserve the state’s remaining grasslands.

“Once it’s gone, it’s not coming back.”
– Smoky Hills rancher

Long-term carbon losses

Intact grasslands store carbon in the soil. The fine, fibrous roots of grasses are concentrated in surface soils. These roots are long-lived and slow to decay. As these roots decay, they contribute to long-lasting soil organic carbon pools that improve soil quality, and trap carbon belowground. When

Kansas grassland soils are cultivated in row-crop agriculture, it can take over a century to rebuild these carbon stocks¹⁸.

Increase in disease vectors for animals and humans

The increase of invasive trees and brush into grasslands has been cited as a threat to human health in three ways: woody plant pollen can lead to increased seasonal allergies and reduced respiratory health; the increased risk of wildfires from the fuel of woody invasives can cause more fire volatility and intensity; and the increased risk of vector-borne disease from mosquitos and ticks¹⁹, including Alpha-gal Syndrome, Lyme disease, and West Nile Virus in humans and theileria orientalis in cattle.

“Ticks are not just a livestock issue, they’re a human issue.” – Smoky Hills rancher

The Total Economic Impact of Grasslands is Unknown

Economic data indicate that the beef industry contributes \$22.9 billion to Kansas’ economy in direct output and \$33.2 billion in total economic contributions each year. The beef industry employs more than 57,400 workers in the state²⁰.

The industry-level data help illustrate the primary use of the 15.8 million acres of native grasslands and 3 million acres of pastureland in Kansas. Yet there are gaps in research and data when it comes to understanding the total economic impact that these grasslands contribute to the state and region.

Some of these gaps include:

- The ability to separate the increased revenue that grasslands generate for the beef industry — increased income from grazing and backgrounding cattle in Kansas; increased income or reduced costs for cow calf operations in Kansas; increased income from beef/cattle industry investments in Kansas; and the economic relationship between the state’s beef cattle feedlot and processing industries and their proximity to Kansas grasslands.
- The total value of grassland acreage and land value lost to woody encroachment each year.
- The total capital invested and available for grasslands, both public and private.
- The total conservation funding available for maintaining working grasslands, preventing woody encroachment, and implementing prescribed burning.
- The value or feed efficiency that Kansas grasslands provide comparing cash rents and other input costs to pounds per day added on quality Kansas grass.

ACTION STEPS



Woody species encroach on rangeland in eastern Kansas.

In the fall of 2025, the Kansas Department of Agriculture and the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts met with members of the state’s ranching and conservation communities to identify immediate, short-term action steps to encourage and support enhanced conservation of private working grasslands. These meetings, and this issue brief, are the result of continued conversations with ranchers and partner organizations who are increasingly concerned about the loss of grasslands to invasive tree and brush encroachment and conversion to cropland — as well as a shared concern that Kansans aren’t aware of the economic and ecological importance of the grasslands that make up 30% of their state.

“We’ve got a lot of opportunities. We need to figure out how to take advantage of them.”
– Flint Hills rancher

Working with ranchers who had effectively demonstrated that profitable ranching goes hand in hand with conserving and promoting grasslands, Secretary of Agriculture Mike Beam and Kansas Department of Agriculture staff met in October 2025 with more than 50 Kansas ranchers and landowners in the state’s core grasslands areas: the Flint Hills, the Gypsum Hills, the High Plains, and the Smoky Hills. These ranchers and landowners represented more than 300,000 estimated acres of grasslands in Kansas. Additional insight was provided by the Kansas Association of Conservation District’s Grasslands Committee during its annual meeting in Wichita in November. An online survey in November and December reached 214 Kansans from 65 counties who provided input.

The following five issues, and suggested action steps, are those that have surfaced most often from the ranching and conservation communities through these conversations. For more background and additional suggestions from the conversations and survey that influenced these recommendations, please visit agriculture.ks.gov/grasslands.

What we heard: More Kansans need to understand the importance and significance of grasslands.

Why:

- The ecological and economic importance of grasslands isn’t well understood — even in many of the more rural and agricultural regions of Kansas.
- Grasslands education isn’t widely taught in K-12 schools, though some conservation districts may

include it in their youth outreach field tours.

- Programs and efforts like the former Symphony in the Flint Hills and the Flint Hills Discovery Center have been successful in educating non-agriculture communities on the value, but these efforts only provide education to a portion of the state.
- The Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan was credited as a successful campaign for the public — particularly in the state’s urban areas — when it comes to understanding “burn culture” and its importance in grasslands, but awareness and support for prescribed burns often does not extend outside of the Flint Hills.
- One note: ranchers want to elevate the importance of working grasslands in Kansas, but in ways that respect private property rights of landowners and managers.

Action step: Identify existing resources that can help the public become more “grasslands literate” and make the resources more publicly available and accessible by reaching out to new partners.

Action step: Consider developing a statewide promotional campaign highlighting the economic, ecological and community benefits of Kansas grasslands and the value of preserving them for future generations.

Action step: Explore opportunities to work with state and federal land management agencies to address woody encroachment in public spaces, such as highway right of ways, state/federally managed parks, and other public spaces such as public golf courses.

Action step: Explore programming opportunities to educate and engage the public in state and federal parks where grasslands are prominent.

What we heard: Ranchers need help with controlling invasive species — specifically woody species (like eastern red cedar, hedge, honey locust, Siberian elm, etc.), Old World Bluestem, sericea lespedeza and other invasive grasses and trees.

Why:

- Invasive plant species go beyond fence lines. Seeds can travel easily from an area where an invasive species is not managed or controlled and cause problems in pastures where cattle graze.
 - This reduces the available acreage for grazing, thus leading to concerns about reduced herd sizes and management practices (eventually causing concerns about the impact on consumers).
- Clearing trees and brush is expensive and dangerous.
 - Prescribed burning is most efficient in time and cost, but requires rapid coordination of a number of people who know what they’re doing in order to do it safely — all in a short time window that also must mesh with local fire/emergency management schedules and availability.
 - Mechanical removal is dangerous, costly, and labor intensive for contractors.
 - Spraying is costly and carries the risk of collateral damage to desirable species.
 - Regardless of the method, it’s an ongoing, labor-intensive process to maintain.
- Financial assistance via government programs like the Environment Quality Incentives Program through the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service are helpful and funding for approaches such as the Great Plains Grassland Initiative have made significant progress in helping landowners be proactive. However, some concerns remain about funding availability and flexibility of the programs.

Action step: Identify state-level resources for funds and equipment for local Prescribed Burning Associations and local rural fire departments.

Action step: Convene state-level partners in emergency management, Kansas Forest Service, local rural

fire departments, and others to identify “labor-share” opportunities to assist local efforts and train more Kansans locally to assist in these efforts.

Action step: Continue to educate and inform ranchers and landowners about existing and emerging programs to reduce and stop woody species encroachment — including the Great Plains Grassland Initiative approach, KDA Division of Conservation cost-share programs administered by local conservation districts, and other programs administered by state and federal agencies and non-governmental organizations.

Action step: Develop research/education programs and materials for Old World Bluestem and other emerging areas of concern.

Action step: Continue to work with and support producer-led organizations such as the Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition and the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Landowner Alliance doing on-the-ground education and support for producers and statewide organizations such as the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts that coordinate and implement conservation efforts.

Action step: Encourage governmental agencies responsible for managing rights-of-way and public lands to aggressively reduce invasive plant species and woody plant infestation as an example for properly managed grasslands.

What we heard: Grasslands are increasingly being promoted as having “good hunting potential” with the presence of brush and trees for wildlife habitats at record-high prices.

Why:

- The practice of leaving trees and brush to encourage deer habitat is a competing value for removing the trees and brush for grazing cattle.
- Buyers of hunting land may not live or work locally and aren’t able to spot emerging areas of concern of overgrowth as easily.
- There may be a gap in education for out-of-town landowners who may not have a background or knowledge of land management practices.
- Ranchers are concerned about losing productive grazing acres.

Action step: Work with the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks to develop educational materials for landowners. Highlight the availability of voluntary programs for education and assistance for tree/brush maintenance.

Action step: Develop and make available resource materials targeted to recreationalists. One example from the ranching community: provide resource guides for tree and brush management for out-of-town landowners who may come back for the traditional community meal to celebrate the opening weekend of pheasant season.

Action step: Continue supporting research on best practices for managing grasslands for wildlife habitat.

Action step: Provide additional support for and encouragement of policies and efforts to keep land in agricultural production even if it is also marketed for hunting and recreation.

What we heard: There are questions about economics related to grasslands. The top concerns: quantifying the economic impact for the agriculture sector, and also for the economic impact related to recreational use.

Why:

- Land being marketed and used primarily for recreation and hunting is still taxed at a lower agricultural use rate. It may meet the technical requirements of ag use value under state law, but it does not meet the “spirit of the tax category” and it does not protect the state’s agricultural base or the industry’s

long-term economic potential. There is no requirement that the land remain in a productive condition.

- While economics are a component of the overall benefits of grasslands — including environmental benefits like air quality, water quality and water quantity — the overall value for Kansas in terms of acres, annual income, production and longer-term impact to property taxes is unknown.
- Ranchers raised additional questions about the local and state receipts from hunting permits from in- and out-of-state (residents and non-residents) permit buyers, and whether Kansas offers permits at rates that reflect the value of Kansas' deer herd and quality of the hunting experience as compared with rates charged by other states.

Action step: Commission a state-led economic impact assessment of the overall agricultural use and value of grasslands at local and county levels and the opportunity cost of losing those lands to unmanaged wasteland.

Action step: Commission a state-led economic impact assessment of hunting-related recreational activities at local and county levels and how the state's rates for permits compare to states with similar deer populations.

Action step: Commission a state assessment that determines an estimate of acres of land, on a county basis, that's appraised and taxed as use value but is not suitable for agricultural production because of canopy (tree) cover and/or not used for agricultural production. In addition, the study could estimate the economic impact to these landowners and the local taxing authorities if these lands were appraised and taxed as commercial property.

Action step: Conduct more research on the ecological and economic value that is gained from working grasslands, with a focus on water conservation and carbon sequestration.

What we heard: Ranchers see value in creating a state-level position focused on grasslands partnerships and relationships.

Why:

- Ranchers would like to see more coordination between state agencies. This could include working with the Kansas Department of Transportation on right-of-way maintenance issues like clearing brush and trees and being mindful of spreading invasive grasses such as Old World Bluestem.
- Such a position could increase the recognition of grasslands as a water-related topic — both quantity and quality.
- The state would benefit from a point person to be dedicated to applying for federal conservation programs, including those that were approved as part of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, and to assist the KDA Division of Conservation in highlighting these opportunities for private-sector partner organizations, ranchers, and landowners.

Action step: Explore the creation of a Grasslands Partnership Manager position within the Kansas Department of Agriculture or elsewhere at the state level. This position could help build partnerships with others working in and with grasslands in Kansas — federal partners, universities, producer-led organizations such as the Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition, conservation-minded hunting groups like Pheasants Forever and Ducks Unlimited, working lands conservation groups like Ranchland Trust of Kansas and The Nature Conservancy, and other non-governmental organizations, to coordinate and direct additional funding and technical support to Kansas ranchers. This could also involve collaboration with the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks on land management education and application of hunting permits, improved management of woody invasives on state-managed lands, and working with the Kansas Forest Service to address forest management and certain conservation tree sales, as well as identifying ways for grasslands to be included in statewide water planning efforts.

GET INVOLVED

Improving and conserving Kansas' grasslands will require all of us, working together, to make a difference. One rancher involved in this project suggested that one of the best action steps that could be taken is to be creative and bold in considering new approaches. Some of these approaches could include:

In addition to continuing to use good conservation practices, **ranchers and landowners** can spread the word about the importance of grasslands in a number of ways, from talking to their neighbors and community members to inviting school and civic groups to visit their land for field days. They can be active in groups that support and promote grasslands education and advocacy, join or start a Prescribed Burn Association, or find ways to work with their rural fire departments. **Hunters and recreationalists** can access resources about managing grasslands for wildlife habitat and work with neighbors to understand community values related to the resource.

Federal, state and local agencies can continue to engage with ranchers and landowners to understand current challenges and opportunities. They can explore new partnerships to address identified challenges and continue to support, where appropriate, voluntary, rancher-led programs to improve grasslands. **Policymakers** at all levels can support grasslands by learning more about the resource and opportunities for assisting the caretakers of the land.

Non-governmental organizations and **research institutions** can continue to support ranchers by providing education, advocacy and best practices. Universities can contribute in a number of ways, including strengthening their rangeland programs and sharing findings with the ranching community. Non-governmental organizations can include grassland-specific content and policies in their platforms.

Kansans can grow their appreciation for grasslands by learning more about the prairie and its importance to the state. They can attend public field days, learn to identify native plants, support education and cultural efforts, hike and bike on public trails, and simply appreciate the beauty of wide open spaces.

For more about this project, and additional resources, visit agriculture.ks.gov/grasslands.

APPENDIX: REFERENCES

Endnotes:

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