



# NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS

JOINT VENTURE



ANNUAL REPORT

2023





# Greetings from the Coordinator!

Welcome to the first Northern Great Plains Joint Venture Annual Report!

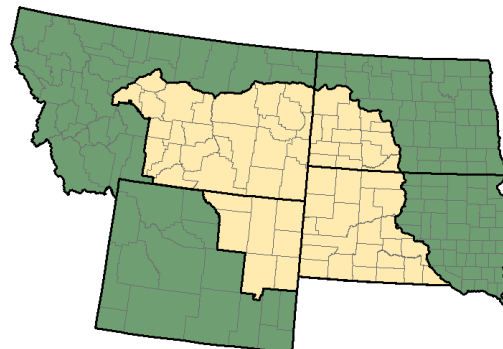
2023 was a year of partnerships. Partnerships are hard work and they take time, but the benefits of working collaboratively pay dividends in the long run. Last year, NGPJV partners dug into building trust, enhancing collaborations, and building our networks, all working toward the common vision of enhancing and supporting resilient grasslands. In this Annual Report, we showcase the work of our NGPJV partnership to work across fences, catalyze conservation, and leverage broader initiatives. We also quantified the collective footprint of conservation actions in the Northern Great Plains to elevate the impactful work of our partnerships.

In 2024 we look forward to more capacity, deeper relationships, and ongoing targeted work that supports the people and the resources of the Northern Great Plains. Together, we are building a sustainable future!

— Catherine Wightman

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Cover Photo: Erin Fairbank

# Catalyzing Conservation Through Partnership

Catherine Wightman, NGPJV Coordinator

When one thinks of the Northern Great Plains, it often conjures images of vast horizons and frolicking antelope, yet it is the people that define the region. Ranchers, farmers, indigenous people, and other community members embody the resilience of this landscape, and many are dedicated to sustaining rangelands for cultural significance, current livelihoods, or future legacies. Despite this, individual efforts alone are not keeping pace with the magnitude of grassland loss and ecosystem degradation. Conservation professionals are rallying to support local champions with a shared vision of building resilient landscapes that can slow the tide of habitat loss. The Northern Great Plains Joint Venture is providing the forum for innovative thinking and decisive action to cooperatively address some of the more challenging conservation problems in ways that work locally and make a difference at larger scales. By making connections, providing capacity and resources, and convening people, the NGPJV is collectively catalyzing effective conservation in the Northern Great Plains.

To expand community impact, the NGPJV is helping to bring producers, land managers, and conserva-

tion professionals together to learn from each other. Over the last two years, the NGPJV supported five wet meadow restoration workshops that reached 135 people. Wet meadow restoration is an emerging technique popular with producers and land managers because of its low cost and high probability of positively influencing rangelands. The technique uses locally sourced materials to slow water runoff and erosion, keeping water on the landscape and, in turn, nourishing the surrounding vegetation, recharging the groundwater, and leading to more vibrant grasslands. Like a community barn-raising event, wet meadow restoration workshops create a space where partners work together to help the land and their fellow producers; the shared experiences lead to lasting relationships and trust.

The NGPJV is using our extensive collaborative to develop and maintain a conservation delivery network of private lands biologists and managers. We support this network by connecting professionals around shared work, facilitating state-based training and learning forums, and convening discussions for cross-partner projects and funding proposals.







It is also important to serve the people working locally by continuing to enhance and share scientific knowledge and planning tools. The NGPJV engages a technical committee of regional experts who share information, identify priority technical needs, and help fill information gaps. At the 2023 Technical Committee meeting in Billings, Montana, the group identified high impact information needs spanning socioeconomics and marketing, science integration, communications, conservation policy, and spatial planning tools.

The power of the NGPJV partnership is in connecting people and place, aligning around shared values, and collectively working to address conservation challenges in places with strong community will and high resource value. The NGPJV is continuing to broaden the network, welcoming leaders from the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance to the NGPJV Management Board in summer 2023. These new partners will help connect NGPJV work with local resource needs in Wyoming and on tribal lands. By empowering place-based conservation, the NGPJV coalition is helping to ensure that the people and the resources of the region will be sustained now and into the future. 🌀

**As a means of catalyzing work to address priority science needs, the NPGJV offers small science grants and is often one of several entities funding these projects.**

**Current NGPJV-supported projects include:**

- **Spatial Prioritization of Grasslands Management for Bird Conservation – led by Bird Conservancy of the Rockies**
- **Social Science in Support of Grasslands Conservation in the Northern Great Plains – led by University of Wyoming**
- **Informing Multi-scale Strategic Habitat Conservation for Priority Grassland Birds in the Northern Great Plains – led by University of Montana**
- **Monitoring Songbird Response to Grassland and Wet Meadow Restoration – led by Bird Conservancy of the Rockies**

# Working Across Fences: Collaborations in Science & Capacity

Krista Erdman, NGPJV Science Integration Specialist

The Northern Great Plains Joint Venture has been working across fences and Joint Venture (JV) boundaries to support grassland conservation that bridges gaps between land ownership and cultures and moves the needle on habitat conservation and grassland bird population targets. The NGPJV and Prairie Pothole Joint Venture (PPJV) science integration specialists continue to collaborate across the shared states of South Dakota and Montana. Science integration specialists connect ecology, scientific models, on-the-ground projects, and people and work to provide partners with locally relevant information and tools. The PPJV science integration specialist worked with southeastern Montana NRCS field offices to develop Targeted Implementation Plans for many NGPJV counties, which focus conservation efforts on priority resource concerns and areas. These plans promote sustainable grazing practices and emphasize the secondary benefits to grassland birds and other wildlife, while supporting working lands.

In November, the NGPJV science integration specialist coordinated a first-of-its-kind private lands biologist forum for South Dakota's private lands-focused biologists, specialists, and field staff. Over three days, 110 private lands practitioners from 28 organizations met in person to network and address the challenges and opportunities that exist within South Dakota's



landscapes. Attendees connected with new and familiar partners, shared information and experiences, and heard from organization leadership, landowners, local consultants, and each other. Core values of trust, flexibility, and partnership and collaboration were continually emphasized by attendees and speakers alike. The forum provided a needed opportunity for private lands-focused discussion and networking, and attendees are excited to carry the forum's momentum forward into future events and collaborative action across the state.

## SOUTH DAKOTA PRIVATE LANDS BIOLOGIST FORUM Post-event Survey

**96%** connected  
with new partners  
in their region

**100%** connected  
with new partners  
in the state

Interested in attending a  
statewide private lands-  
focused event at least  
every other year

Interested in learning  
more about partner  
programs, outreach,  
and economics



This collaboration extends across the broader region, as the science integration and science to implementation staff from the Northern Great Plains, Prairie Pothole, and Intermountain West JVs began to meet virtually to discuss regional science transfer efforts. The bimonthly meetings provide space for staff to share scientific tools and materials, offer technical support, and identify opportunities for additional cross-JV collaboration. In 2023, staff shared strategies on how to engage with non-traditional partners, how to effectively report around North American Waterfowl Management Plan priorities, and how to communicate the benefits of NRCS Climate-Smart Agriculture and Forestry Activities.

In August, the NPGJV was awarded \$547,844 through a five-year Cooperative Agreement by the Montana NRCS to hire a second science integration specialist to serve southeastern Montana. This new position will work closely with the NGPJV and PPJV science integration specialists to increase partner access to conservation science, data, and tools. The new specialist will also assist local Montana

NRCS offices with the development of Targeted Implementation Plans.

In collaboration with local partners, the NGPJV supports partner biologist positions throughout the Northern Great Plains geography. These shared positions provide technical support to local NRCS field offices and landowners. Each of the collaborative partner positions supported by the NGPJV help fill capacity gaps and provide technical assistance to target meaningful conservation of grasslands.

By investing in place-based science transfer, local partnerships, and collaborative capacity, the NGPJV is working toward its ecological goals as well as supporting the rural communities in which many conservation practitioners serve. The shared positions throughout the NGPJV are improving habitat, building trust, and broadcasting the importance of grasslands to new audiences. Through cross-JV work, targeted priority resource concerns are being funded and improved, partners are convened and relationships are prioritized, and conservation action is reaching beyond traditional boundaries. 🌱

**Many partners work together to support field capacity in the region. Positions that utilize NGPJV assistance include:**

- **Pheasants Forever Coordinating Wildlife Biologist, Winnett MT – Implementing habitat projects to benefit grassland birds, big game, and other wildlife.**
- **Pheasants Forever Coordinating Wildlife Biologist, Big Horn WY – Building trust and enhancing the conservation network through over 50 landowner contacts and well-attended in-person workshops.**
- **South Dakota Grasslands Initiative Director – Promoting South Dakota’s grasslands through public awareness and partnership coordination.**
- **American Bird Conservancy Private Lands Biologist, Timber Lake SD – Delivering conservation programs to agricultural producers in central South Dakota, including producers living on the Standing Rock and Cheyenne River Reservations.**



# Tracking Conservation Impact

Erin Fairbank, NGPJV Conservation Programs Coordinator

The sum of cooperative conservation is greater than its parts. By showcasing the work of our partners and communicating the value of our combined footprint, the NGPJV is helping to demonstrate how we are, together, making an impact in the grasslands. To set ambitious yet realistic conservation goals, the NGPJV quantified [population objectives](#) for five declining grassland-obligate bird species in the region and the predicted amount of habitat conservation required to achieve these objectives. While many factors may influence declining trends for these five species, habitat loss is one of the key drivers. Habitat targets for each species were calculated as the range of acres needed to achieve NGPJV population objectives, focusing on breeding habitat.

Based on these calculations, approximately 1-2.5 million acres of conservation are required to meet objectives for all five priority grassland bird species in the NGPJV geography by 2026. In FY 2023, the

NGPJV and partners addressed habitat loss and declining population trends by enhancing, restoring, or retaining 385,611 acres of habitat in the region (Tables 1 & 2), representing a total \$12.7 million investment. The NGPJV and partners have conserved 1,416,913 acres since 2016, moving closer to our habitat objectives and helping to mitigate the impact of ongoing conversion (Figure 1).

Accounting for the ongoing loss of ~235,000 acres or 0.3% of grasslands per year, the NGPJV estimates a net gain of 149,913 acres in 2023 through conservation efforts by our partners. These efforts positively impacted 268,859 grassland bird individuals from the five priority species. The conservation of 385,611 grassland acres is equivalent to 352,834,065 pounds of forage and supports over 100,000 estimated AUMs on working lands in the region (Animal Unit Month – 1 AUM is the amount of forage needed for a 1,000 pound cow to graze for one month). This is a huge value for livestock producers, as it provides enough forage to keep a herd

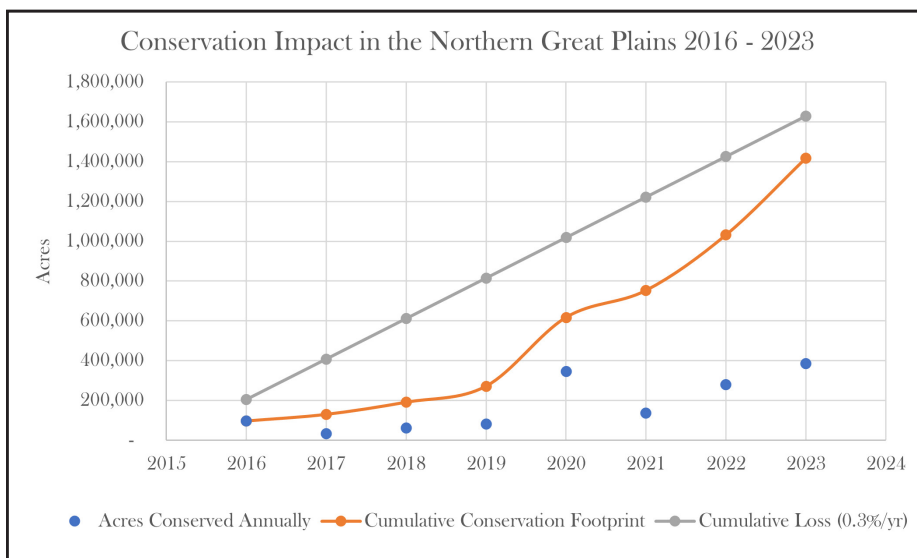


Figure 1: Cumulative conservation impact by the NGPJV and Partners in the Northern Great Plains since 2016 contrasted with ongoing loss in the region.

Tables 1 & 2: Acres conserved by NGPJV partners in FY23 by project type & habitat type, respectively

Project Type	Acres
Enhance	195,455
Establish	7
Protect	173,248
Restore	16,900
TOTAL	385,611

Habitat Type	Acres
Mesic	6
Riparian	2,517
Upland	376,830
Wetland	6,258
TOTAL	385,611

Table 3: Summary of conservation outcomes

Year	Acres Conserved as Working Grasslands	Grass (pounds of forage)	Supports an Estimated # of AUMs	Carbon Sequestration Potential (Mt CO <sub>2</sub> e)	Grassland Birds Impacted	Economic Value (NASS pasture rental rates)
2023	385,611	352,834,065	106,043.03	10,099,399	268,859	\$10,411,497
2022	278,668	254,981,220	76,633.70	715,623	199,684	\$6,688,032
2021	135,576	124,052,040	37,283.40	1,769,473	95,546	\$3,050,460
2020	345,462	316,097,730	95,002.05	4,477,835	245,148	\$7,600,164
2019	80,716	73,855,140	22,196.90	2,357,113	57,705	\$1,775,752
2018	61,105	55,911,075	16,803.88	-	-	\$1,283,205
2017	33,387	30,549,105	9,181.43	-	-	\$717,821
2016	96,388	88,195,020	26,506.70	-	-	\$2,024,148
	<b>1,416,913</b>	<b>1,296,475,395</b>	<b>389,651</b>	<b>19,419,444</b>	<b>866,942</b>	<b>\$33,551,079</b>

of 17,674 cows fed through a 6-month grazing season. Conservation efforts also have the potential to sequester 10,099,399 metric tons of carbon, which is equivalent to the amount produced by 2 million gasoline-powered passenger vehicles in one year. The rangelands conserved by our partners over an 8-year period have an economic value of over \$33.5 million, as measured by pasture rental rates (Table 3). Keeping grass in grass means keeping working lands working, and vice versa!

The NGPJV provides funding for targeted habitat projects through our Northern Grassland Restoration Incentive Program (N-GRIP). During FY23, we completed four N-GRIP projects with support from a National Fish & Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) SPIRIT grant (see Figure 2) and have another 12,000+ acres of projects in the works, which are being funded by NFWF, ConocoPhillips, and an award from the World Wildlife Fund specifically for grass seedings. We also received a 2023 NFWF Northern Great Plains grant, which provides ~\$200,000 for habitat projects. Half of the awarded funds were directly sub-awarded to South Dakota Game, Fish, and Parks for projects in the state beginning in 2024.

The four projects completed through N-GRIP funds in FY23 conserved 14,388 acres in Montana, Wyoming, South Dakota, and North Dakota. Of those acres, 155 were restored through a native grass seeding, with the remaining acres enhanced. All projects are expected to benefit grassland bird habitat and populations. The majority of the funded projects

were for grazing systems – specifically, livestock water infrastructure and cross-fencing as well as a virtual fence project in ND. These projects not only benefit grassland habitat but also support working ranches. On two of the projects, the JV was a contributing partner in larger partner projects via N-GRIP. The partners involved in the collaborative projects were World Wildlife Fund and Pheasants Forever in MT and Ducks Unlimited and Audubon in ND. Without the support of the NGPJV and the flexibility of N-GRIP, the projects would not have been completed fully. Partnerships are one of the most important ways to meet large conservation goals – for both resilient grasslands and grassland-obligate birds. Through the work of the JV and many partners, we are well on our way to meeting our conservation goals by 2027! 🌱

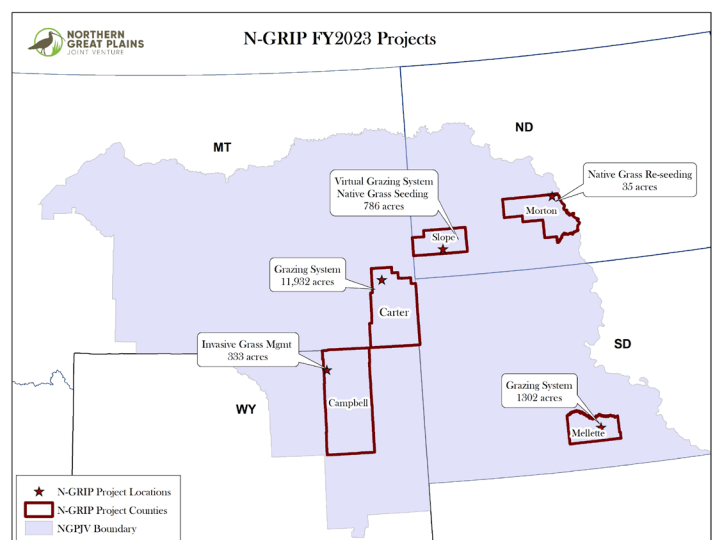


Figure 2: FY2023 N-GRIP project locations and information



# Using Communications to Move the Conservation Needle

Lucinda Morris, PPJV Communications Specialist

The growth of NGPJV communications efforts continues to evolve in response to the ever-shifting dynamics across the partnership and the landscape we serve. With dedicated capacity for communications still being a relatively new addition to the NGPJV team, outreach efforts over the last several years had primarily focused on building our “common core” of communication channels. Things like the website, Facebook page, and quarterly e-news took time to build and bring in line with the JV’s new branding. A reinvigorated NGPJV Communications Committee consisting of Board members and partner communications staff provided invaluable guidance in developing and delivering these core activities. With this baseline complete, the JV has had the opportunity to expand its vision this past year, thinking more about what communications are most needed and how the JV can be value added in communications.

In partnership with the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture, JV communications staff completed an assessment of the “storytelling landscape” over the summer to develop an understanding of the communications that are already happening, where the gaps are, and how the JVs can offer support to our partners. This assessment consisted of direct interviews with partner communications staff, which was an ideal opportunity to continue building relationships and expanding collaboration at different professional levels within the NGPJV partnership. Findings from the assessment indicated that while conservation organizations are partnering more than ever, this effort isn’t necessarily translating to the communications level and communications staff are missing opportunities to collaborate.





With this finding, the JV will play an active role in facilitating or supporting communications networks across our geography. Given that partnerships are the entire modus operandi of the JV model, this approach is a good fit and would help both JVs fill a communications niche in the landscape. JV communications staff are already engaging with the Meadowlark Initiative's Conservation Marketing Group in North Dakota as well as the South Dakota Grassland Initiative and will continue to provide input as requested in support of these broad, partner-based efforts. The connections that were established during the communications assessment will additionally help the JV maintain closer contact with our partners and elevate stories that highlight the exciting work happening across the region.

This work is ongoing and additive to the other communication goals identified in the Strategic Communication Plan, which was updated and approved by the Management Board earlier this year. Continuing to share messaging on the economic and ecological value of intact grasslands remains a priority for the JV, and providing support for Hill Visits, partner outreach efforts, the N-GRIP program, and other such activities will always be a place for the communications program to engage. As we look to 2024, we hope to expand our capacity for communications to continue taking our efforts further and building a coalition of conservation communicators to move the needle on grasslands conservation. 🌿

**The NGPJV is always looking for ways to support and elevate our partner's communications efforts. If you have a collaboration opportunity or story you'd like to share, please feel free to [get in touch!](#)**





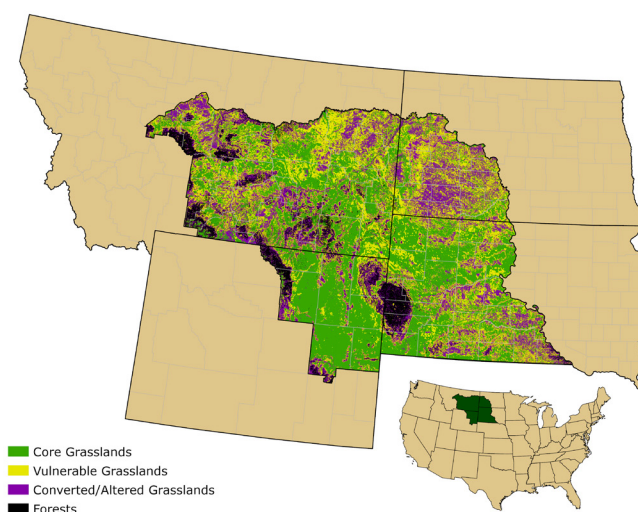
# Pathways to Resilient Grasslands in the Northern Great Plains

Catherine Wightman, NGPJV Coordinator

Over 60 million acres of grass remain in the Northern Great Plains (NGP), arguably more than any other region in North America's central grasslands biome. The NGP makes up just 10% of the biome but provides over 52% of core breeding areas for some of the [most imperiled grassland birds](#), making it a continental stronghold for grasslands and grassland bird conservation. Unfortunately, the region is not immune to the plow, conifer and exotic annual grass invasions, and other stressors that lead to grassland loss and impairment. On average, the region is losing 235,000 acres of intact grassland each year, slowly eroding the core. Grassland loss is a biome-wide predicament, but the NGP plays an outsized role in retaining what is left. Thankfully, there are two broad initiatives bringing attention to this imperiled biome so the people of the NGP do not need to work alone.

The Central Grasslands Roadmap is the collective voice elevating grasslands and inspiring collaboration across the three countries and multiple Indigenous Nations that span the central grasslands. This collaboration has come together around common principles and a shared vision for coordinated conservation while fostering mutual respect for the diverse people living and working across the Central Grasslands. The Roadmap has developed socioeconomic, ecological, and industry and private sector goals that are broad and approachable, leading the narrative and inspiring the people living and working on the land.

The JV8 Central Grasslands Conservation Initiative is the collaborative effort of eight Migratory Bird Joint Ventures to stem grassland losses, with the ultimate goal of reversing or stabilizing declining bird populations in the central grasslands biome. JV8's Business Plan (coming soon in 2024) outlines how the JV8 will work in concert with the Roadmap to deliver on-the-ground actions at scale. To make measurable impacts on declining grassland birds, JV8 has identified a need to scale our collective conservation investment 10 times, from \$180M to \$1.9B annually, with a goal of impacting 27.8 million acres per year. The business plan outlines pathways to deliver on new investments.



## CENTRAL GRASSLANDS ROADMAP

**"Bringing together diverse nations and seven sectors, the Roadmap identifies a shared vision, common principles, and collaborative priorities for the many people and organizations living and working on the Central Grasslands."**

## JV8 CENTRAL GRASSLANDS CONSERVATION INITIATIVE

**"Eight Migratory Bird Joint Ventures unified for conservation of the Central Grasslands."**

At the Northern Great Plains Joint Venture, we are taking these continental efforts to the ground. In 2022, the NGPJV Management Board hosted a meeting with South Dakota state leaders who agreed to work together to bring the Central Grasslands Roadmap vision to South Dakota. A year later, the South Dakota Grasslands Initiative was born, staffed by a full-time director. The NGPJV is also helping the North Dakota Meadowlark Initiative, another state-based effort to step down continental visions, direct millions of Farm Bill dollars to on-the-ground grasslands restoration and enhancement. In preparation for Congressional Hill Visits in March of 2023, the NGPJV leveraged the collective expertise of the Roadmap's Policy Committee to develop a Farm Bill Recommendations handout. The NGPJV met with five Congressional staffers who found this resource particularly relevant and timely as their delegates were wrestling with the nuances of agriculture and conservation policies. NGPJV staff also used materials from the Roadmap's "Grasslands and You" campaign in local communications, including a Girl Scout Big Event in Bismarck that reached 130 families who live in the region but might not have strong connections with grasslands.

JV8's ambitious habitat conservation goals provide a platform for delivering NGPJV's grassland objectives in a larger continental context. The NGPJV brings dedicated staff, cultural will, and opportunities for contagious conservation to the ground. The NGPJV provides program and science support to local conservation professionals, convenes and catalyzes networks, supports community-led collaboratives and capacity needs, and helps direct limited funding to places of high ecological value and high cultural investment. The NGPJV is also putting hundreds of thousands of federal, industry, and foundation dollars on the ground each year. These biome-wide initiatives help us communicate how our regional actions are rolling up to make a difference for the continent.

The NGPJV is doing the work of elevating local and regional voices to continental initiatives and bringing continental resources and messaging to land stewards and rural communities. By leveraging our communal strengths and resources, we are collectively garnering the attention of national and international leaders who can influence policy and direct resources toward the most strategic local investments. The NGP region is critical to biome-wide efforts to retain core grasslands and, as such, needs to be intimately engaged with continental grasslands initiatives. The NGPJV is helping to provide that nexus. 🌱



*Jon Testa*

*Steve Davis*