NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS JOINT VENTURE

SOUTH DAKOTA PRIVATE LANDS BIOLOGIST FORUM

2023 Report

Krista Erdman, NGPJV Science Integration Specialist

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Executive Summary

The Northern Great Plains Joint Venture, along with many sponsors, hosted the South Dakota Private Lands Biologist Forum in November 2023. The purpose of the event was to encourage networking and relationship building among South Dakota's private lands biologists, specialists, and field staff. Over three days, themes of trust, flexibility, and partnership and collaboration were emphasized. In this report, recommendations for future events and collaborative action are outlined, such as an email listserv for regular program updates and trainings and a biennial statewide event for South Dakota's private lands staff.

Introduction

The first South Dakota Private Lands Biologist Forum was held November 28-30, 2023, at the Arrowwood Resort and Conference Center in Oacoma, South Dakota. Attendees included 110 conservation professionals and landowners, representing at least 28 different organizations. Participants engaged in panel discussions, breakout sessions, and presentations and heard from South Dakota landowners, agency and organization leadership, consultants, and colleagues. Above all, the forum provided an opportunity for South Dakota's private lands professionals to network, build relationships, and catalyze the private lands conservation collaborative.

The idea for a private lands-focused forum evolved from conversations with partners, including South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks and Ducks Unlimited, about the need for field-level staff to network in person and establish connections. A planning committee of seven members met for the first time on March 31, 2023, to identify desired outcomes, potential attendees, and speakers. The planning committee met several more times between April and November 2023 and eventually included 14 members from nine organizations. The concept was based on the national private landowner/practitioner forum held in Kansas City, Missouri in 2022, which was organized by the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI), the Missouri Department of Conservation, and American Bird Conservancy.

Pre-Forum Survey Results

On June 6, 2023, a pre-forum survey was sent to field-level potential attendees to better understand their professional interests and needs. Of the 83 surveys sent, 39 potential participants responded (~47% response rate). Most respondents indicated that they are already collaborating with other conservation partners through

communications, projects, and/or grant opportunities. Those who were not collaborating indicated that they either didn't have the network or the time. Respondents expressed short-term concerns around private lands conservation, which included turnover, workload, and educational opportunities. Long-term concerns included funding, program sustainability, and market fluctuations. Respondents were most interested in learning more about agricultural economics, conservation planning, and prescribed fire. Complete pre-forum survey results can be found in Appendix A. These results were used to inform all topics and activities of the final forum agenda.

Forum Organization

The forum began on November 28 with partner introductions, where each partner organization briefly introduced their mission, geography, and contribution to conservation. The introductions were meant to demonstrate where and how organizations are working in South Dakota. Each introduction was accompanied by a map that indicated where partners work in the state.

Figure 1. Keynote speaker Dan O'Brien.

The evening included a keynote address from Dan O'Brien, an author, falconer, and bison rancher operating in western South Dakota. Dan ruminated on the importance of natural resource conservation and the urgency that we collectively face in conserving habitats today. He challenged the audience to get innovative and to imagine new and better ways to protect the state's natural resources.

November 29 began with a welcome from Ryan Wendinger (Habitat Program Administrator for South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks). The morning included a discussion with Steve Jester (Executive Director of Partnerscapes) and Jim Faulstich (Partnerscapes Board Member and South Dakota landowner) on the value of trust between colleagues, partners, and landowners. Steve and Jim emphasized the importance of community presence and involvement, listening to producer needs and motivations, and thinking more about the conservation collaborative than individual organizations.

The morning also had a panel discussion with organization leadership, including Shaun Grassel (Chief Executive Officer of Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance), Matt Gottlob (State Coordinator for Pheasants Forever), Tom Kirschenmann (Director of Wildlife for South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks), Jessica Michalski (State Resource Conservationist for South Dakota NRCS), Chuck Pyle (South Dakota Assistant Director for USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife), Bruce Toay (Manager of Conservation Programs for Ducks Unlimited South Dakota), and Catherine Wightman (Coordinator of the Northern Great Plains Joint Venture). Leadership shared past collaboration successes, which included the implementation of Farm Bill biologists, NRCS collaborative agreements, and funding. Biologist turnover and burnout was addressed, with leadership positing ideas for more positions with smaller geographic focus, increasing biologist idea sharing and opportunities to pursue personal passions, and investing in supportive, vibrant communities.

Figure 2. Leadership panel participants.

The afternoon started with a landowner panel of five landowners from across the state. Operations included grassland and cropland, and each landowner's experience with conservation programs and organizations was different. Landowner panelists encouraged attendees to be involved with their communities to better understand the local culture and build trust. Panelists stressed that each landowner is unique, including their preference on method and timing of communication. Some panelists appreciate reading materials, while others prefer meeting practitioners face-to-face or attending in-person events such as workshops, tours, or farm shows. Across the panel, landowners mentioned that they appreciate honesty and authenticity from private lands collaborators.

The last activity of the day was a presentation on agricultural economics. Brian Chatham (Manager of Agronomy for Ducks Unlimited Great Plains Region) discussed

the six fundamentals of soil health, the economic benefits of healthy soil, and the market nuances of different crops. Jenita Derga (Wild Prairie Solutions LLC) then explained fundamental economics terms, like gross product and gross margin, and how these terms apply to ranching and conservation practices. Both presenters highlighted the importance of understanding a producer's goals and perceived obstacles. To be most effective, conservation must align with the landowner's economic model.

The final day of the forum, November 30, included five breakout sessions and a group discussion. The breakout sessions were an opportunity for participants to hear from each other and share their experiences from the field in smaller groups.

Landscape trends and resource concerns - Seven priority resource concerns were identified, including invasive non-native grasses, woody encroachment, and water for livestock. To address these concerns throughout the state, practitioners are implementing water development projects, wetland and grassland easements, grazing infrastructure, and brush management, among many other practices.

Figure 3. Breakout session discussion.

Successes and failures in the field; sharing stories - Connecting with regional partners, pooling resources, and continuously communicating with landowners and partners have resulted in successful conservation projects. Successful interactions with landowners were achieved through attention to detail, including contact and project timing, landowner goals, and partner programs, and through demonstrating trust and respect.

Tips for talking with landowners - Echoing many of the previous forum activities, participants emphasized being present, respectful, and understanding of the landowner's background, operation, and goals. Importantly, groups reflected on the sometimes-difficult nature of working with private landowners. Exercising empathy,

agreeing to disagree, or partnering with other practitioners may relieve potentially uncomfortable situations.

Current challenges and potential opportunities for collaboration - Participants mentioned that it is difficult to effectively understand the details of other organizations' programs, and some practitioners are not comfortable promoting other programs. Factsheets on each organization, a regular newsletter specifically for private lands conservationists, and/or regular meetings for new and tenured staff would help to alleviate some concern and align partner missions and actions.

How do we keep this momentum going? - Attendees are interested in additional meetings, landowner panels, breakout sessions, and topics like agricultural economics and grazing 101. Groups also expressed the need for an inter-organization program and/or project hub and more regular inter-organization updates. Photos of the complete breakout session notes can be found in Appendix B.

Post-Forum Survey Results

On December 13, 2023, a post-forum survey was sent to all attendees for feedback and recommendations for future private lands conservation events. Of the 110 surveys sent, 36 attendees responded (~33% response rate). Most respondents indicated that they met new regional and state partners at the forum. Respondents found the landowner panel and breakout sessions to be the most valuable activities. Overall, most respondents indicated that the forum was very to extremely valuable and are interested in attending a similar event at least every other year. Complete post-forum survey results can be found in Appendix C.

Themes

The intent of the forum was to establish connections between South Dakota's private lands practitioners and provide an opportunity to build relationships. Three related themes emerged from the forum activities and post-forum survey, including trust, flexibility, and partnership and collaboration. Each of these themes reflect the importance of the conservation collaborative and the value of investing in relationships.

Trust – Every forum activity emphasized trust as the foundation to relationships, partnerships, and successful conservation projects. Building trust can begin with being present in the community and meeting people (landowners or partners) where they are.

Flexibility – For effective landscape-level conservation, flexibility is an invaluable skill. Understanding other organizations' programs and being willing to promote those programs can help identify the best option for the landowner and benefit landscape conservation. When approaching new relationships and projects, it is important to understand that every landowner is unique, and you may need to be inventive in outreach and/or communication methods.

Partnership and collaboration – Partnerships are already strong in South Dakota, but we have urgent conservation challenges that require immediate, collaborative, and potentially innovative action. The forum provided an opportunity for both new and tenured staff to network and begin to build relationships that could move the needle on conservation in the state.

Recommendations

There is sufficient interest to hold a statewide event like the South Dakota Private Lands Biologist Forum at least every other year, provided funding is available. In between, regional partners would be encouraged to gather for locally focused meetings and discussions. Updates and/or outcomes from regional meetings could be shared with other partners at the statewide event.

An annual collaborative onboarding session for new staff from conservation organizations could revisit many of the topics covered at the South Dakota Private Lands Biologist Forum, like partner introductions, tips for engaging with landowners, and the importance of building trust. The onboarding session would help to encourage community, relationship building, and idea sharing among new staff.

Partners are interested in learning more about other programs and program requirements in detail. Many post-forum survey respondents indicated that they wanted more time to hear about available programs and the potential for collaboration. Future events should provide opportunities to share more program

details, which could take place at booths, roundtables, or program- and/or geography-specific breakout sessions.

In addition to private lands conservation practitioners, future events could benefit policy makers and their staff. Representatives should be encouraged to attend to learn more about private lands conservation and its challenges and opportunities in the state.

An electronic newsletter and/or email listserv could be established specifically for private lands conservation practitioners to share updates between in-person meetings. Virtual trainings, informational sessions, or a recorded lecture series could be scheduled for the benefit of new and tenured practitioners.

Following comments from the 'tips for talking with landowners' breakout session, South Dakota's private lands practitioners could partake in mental health awareness and/or sensitivity training. Equipping conservation practitioners with basic tools to identify mental health warning signs could improve or save some South Dakotans' lives. Similarly, practitioners may benefit from a personal safety awareness training. The virtual options, as well as the in-person meetings, could all serve as potential formats.

Thank you!

Thank you to the many people and organizations who made the first South Dakota Private Lands Biologist Forum a success!

Planning Committee members:
Krista Erdman, Co-Lead, Northern Great Plains Joint Venture
Cassie Auxt, Co-Lead, Ducks Unlimited
Angela Dwyer, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies
Kevin Ellison, American Bird Conservancy
Jacquie Evans, Prairie Pothole Joint Venture
Erin Fairbank, Northern Great Plains Joint Venture
Judge Jessop, South Dakota Grassland Coalition
Eric Magedanz, South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks
John Mayrose, South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks
Mark Norton, South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks
Chuck Pyle, South Dakota Partners for Fish and Wildlife; USFWS
Josh Vest, Prairie Pothole Joint Venture
Catherine Wightman, Northern Great Plains Joint Venture
Tom Zinter, Pheasants Forever
Mary Duvall, Facilitator

Bison sponsors:
Bird Conservancy of the Rockies
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
Northern Great Plains Joint Venture
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

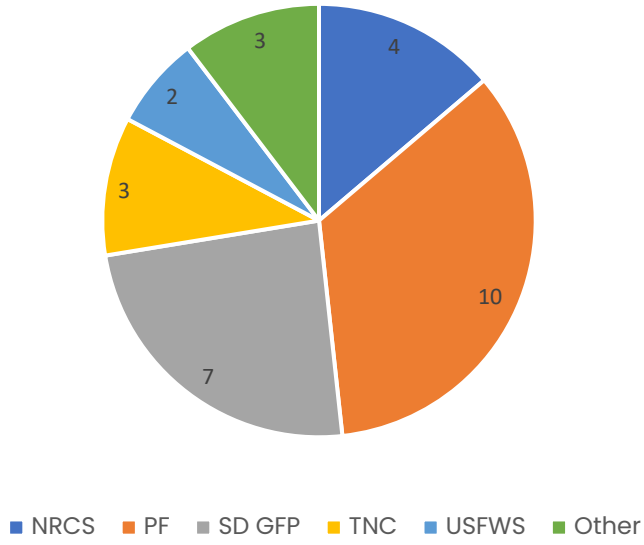
Pronghorn sponsors:
American Bird Conservancy
Ducks Unlimited
South Dakota Grassland Coalition
USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife

Northern Pintail sponsors:
Pheasants Forever
Prairie Pothole Joint Venture
South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks
South Dakota Soil Health Coalition

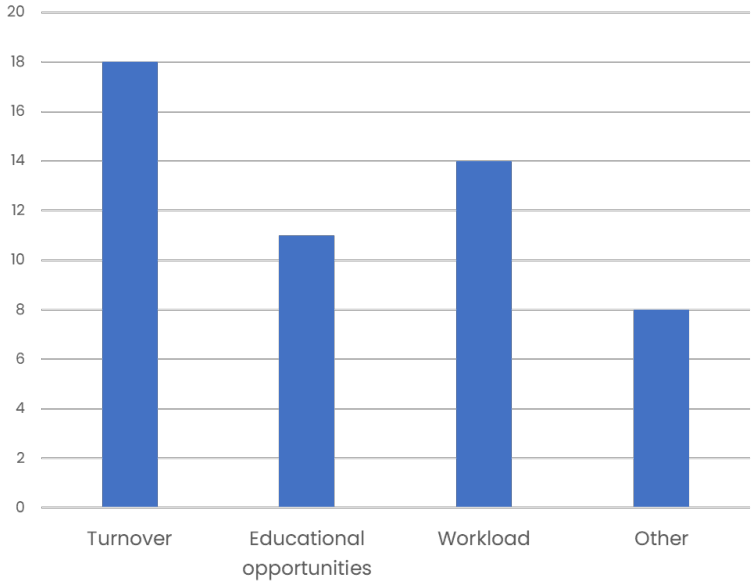
Appendices

Appendix A: Pre-Forum Survey Results

Q1. Please list your agency or organization below:

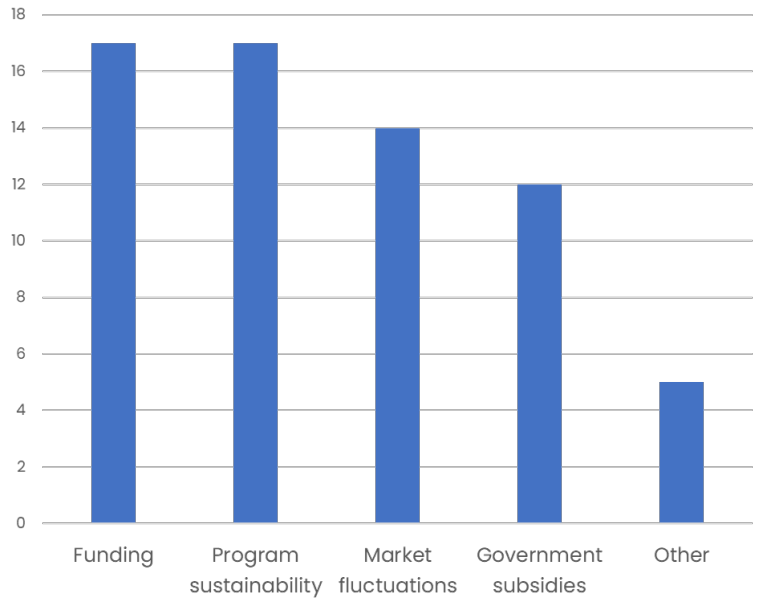


Q2. What short-term concerns do you have with respect to the field of private lands conservation?



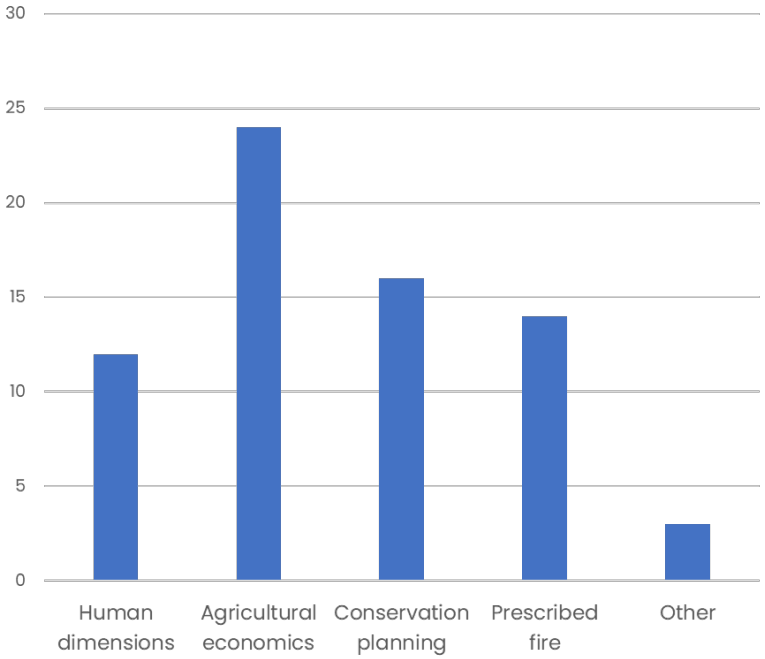
Other answers: customer acquisition, awareness, promotion (n=3), compensation (n=2), keeping up with available programs, funding, mission priority.

Q3. What long-term concerns do you have with respect to the field of private lands conservation?



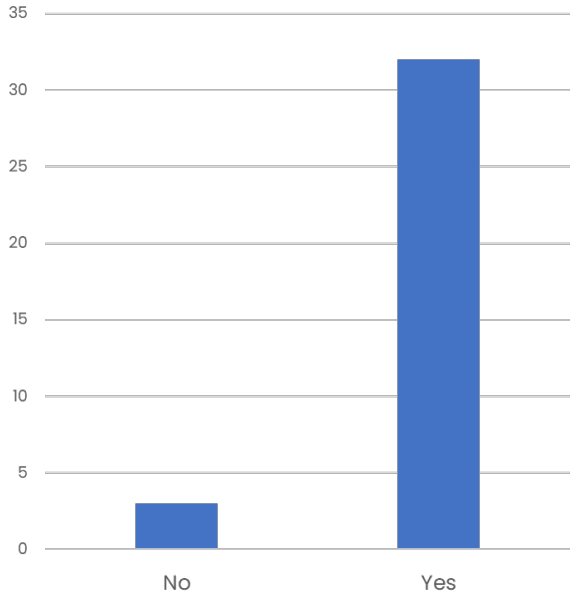
Other answers: landowner awareness, grassland conversion and loss of CRP, compensation, overlapping contracts on conserved acres.

Q4. What technical topics are you interested in learning more about at the forum?

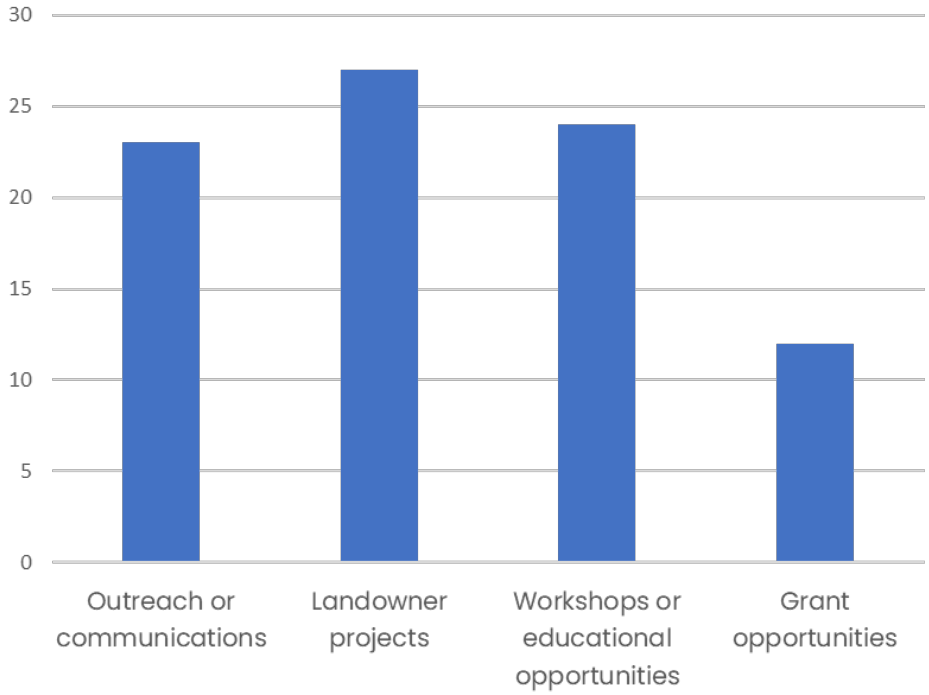


Other answers: marketing ourselves to fund marketing campaigns, conservation plan management, effect of water projects on pasture diversity (cedar removal, well digging, tank projects).

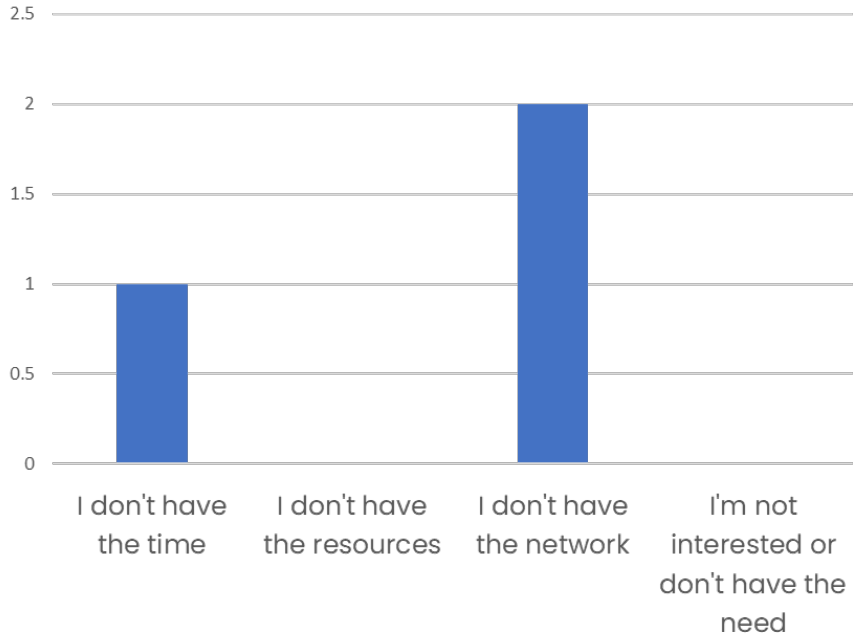
Q5. Are you currently collaborating with other SD conservation partners outside of your organization?



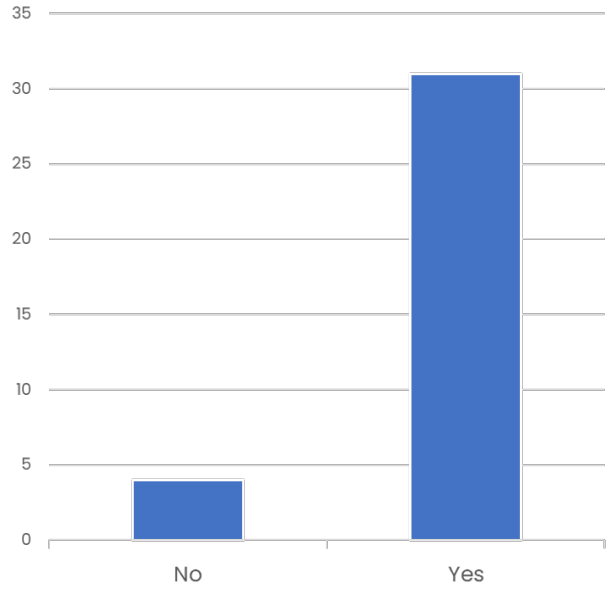
Q5a. If Yes, how are you collaborating with other SD conservation partners?



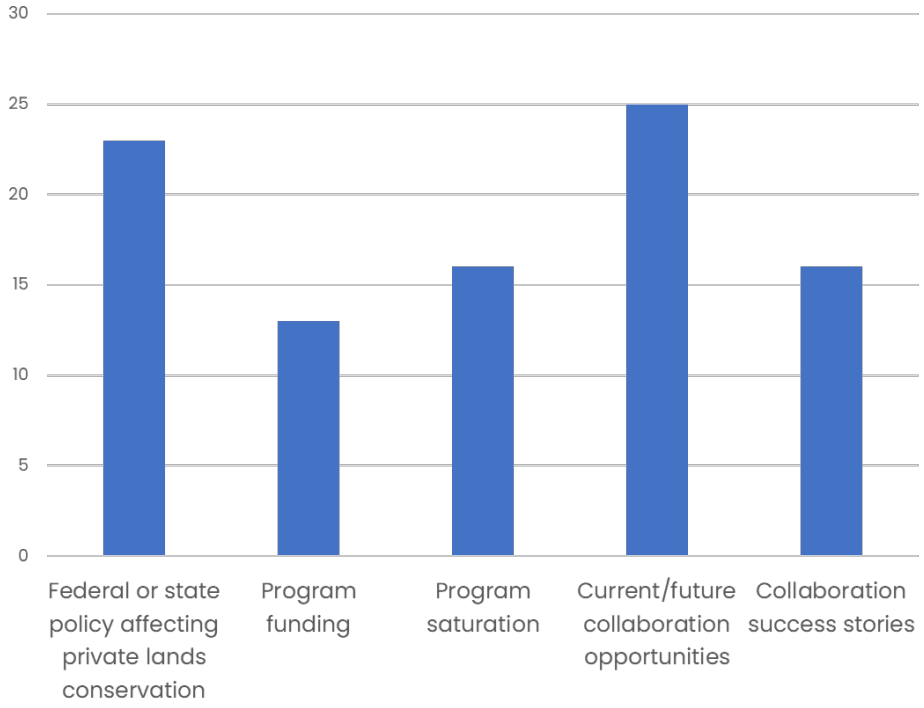
Q5b. If No, why are you not collaborating with other SD conservation partners:



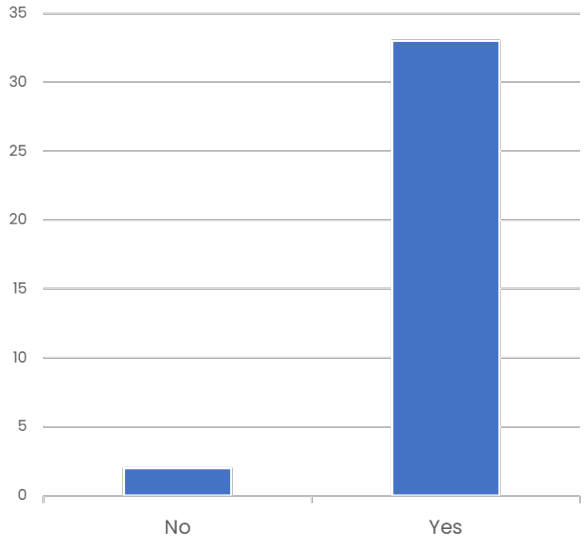
Q6. Are you interested in hearing from state-level leadership on private lands-related topics?



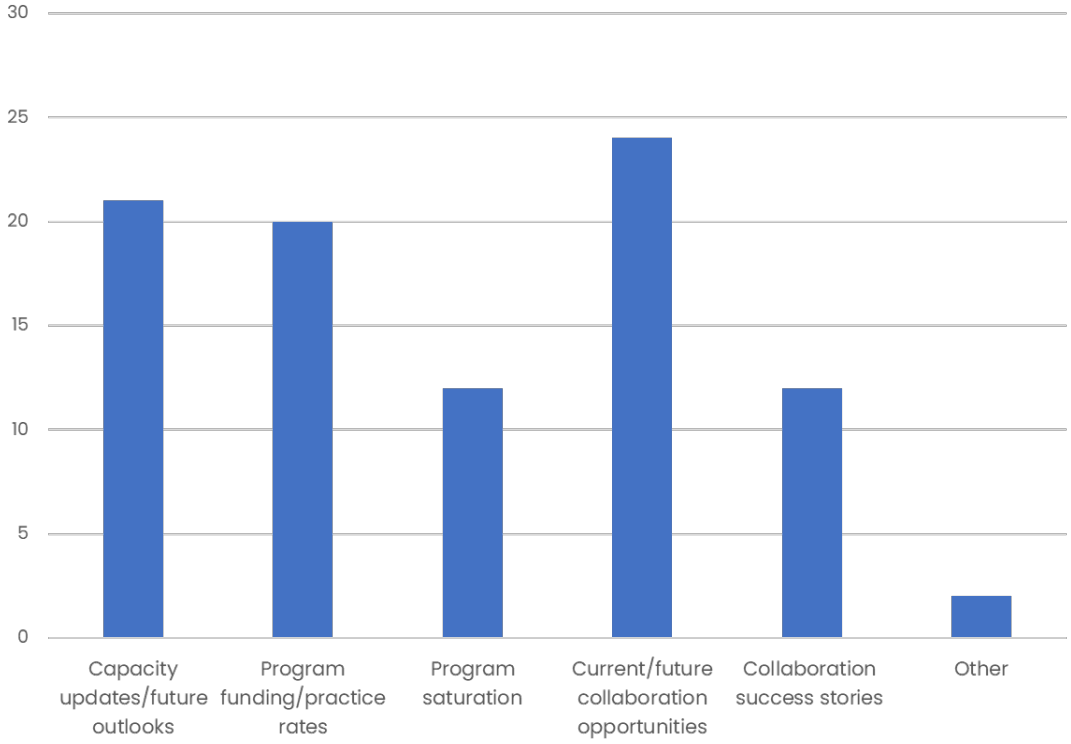
Q6a. If Yes, what topics are you interested in discussing?



Q7. Are you interested in hearing from state-level management staff on private lands-related topics and issues?

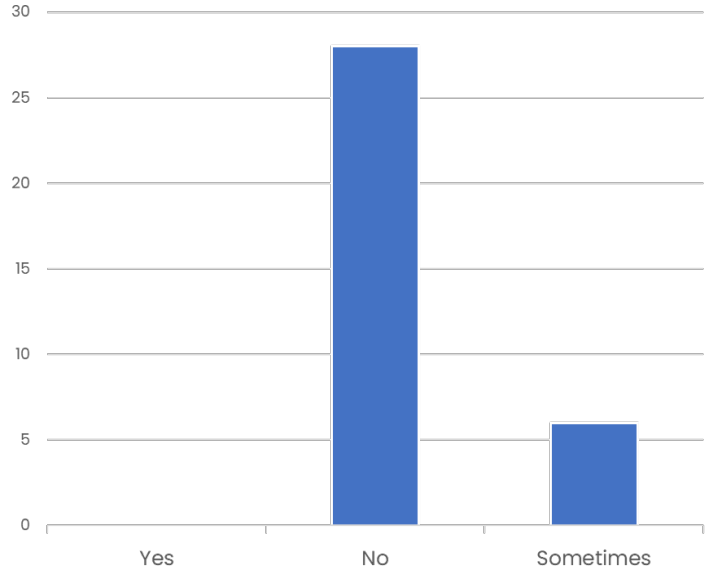


Q7a. If Yes, what topics are you interested in discussing?

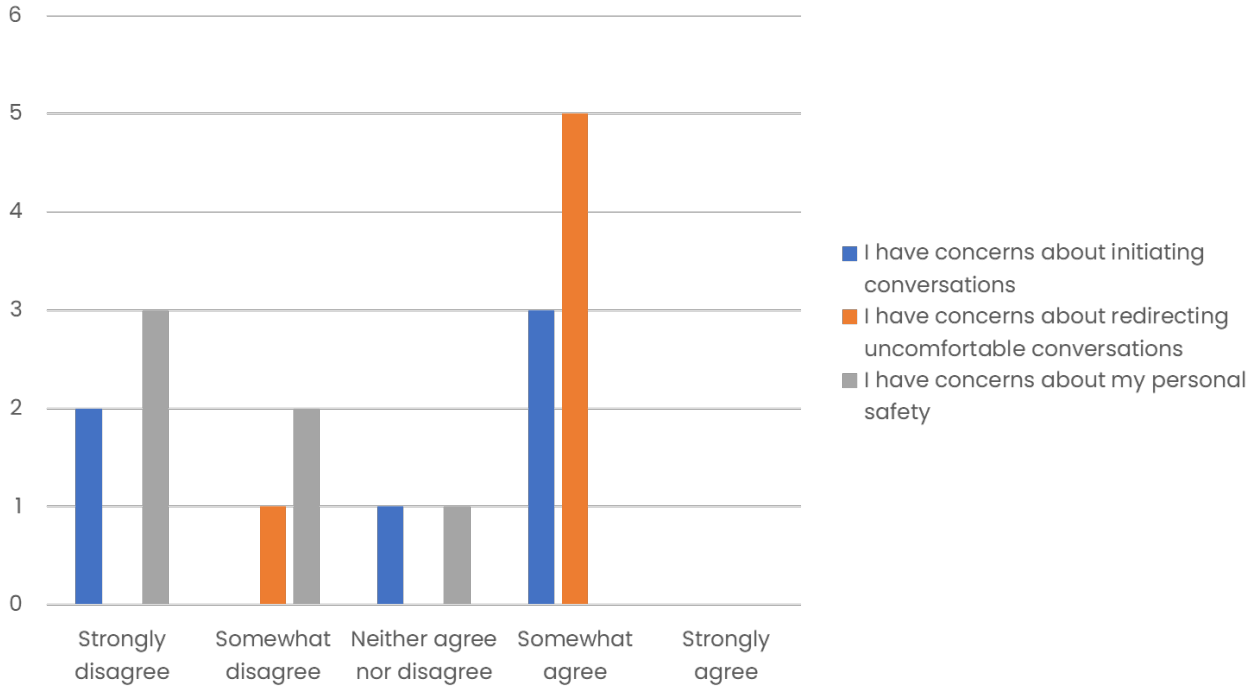


Other answers: hear a couple failed stories.

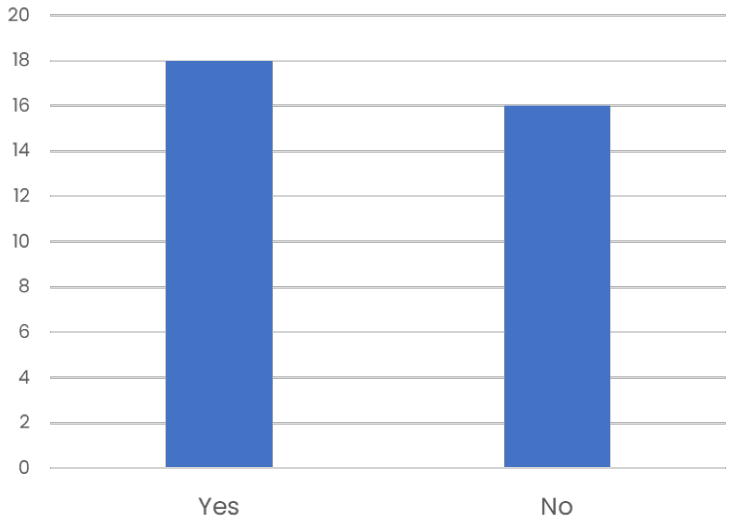
Q8. Do you have any concerns about meeting landowners one-on-one?



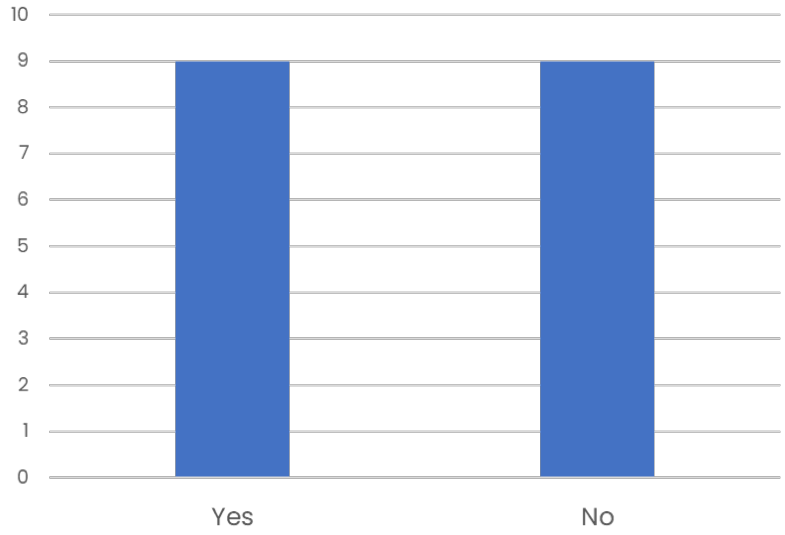
Q8a. If Yes or Sometimes, please rate the following:



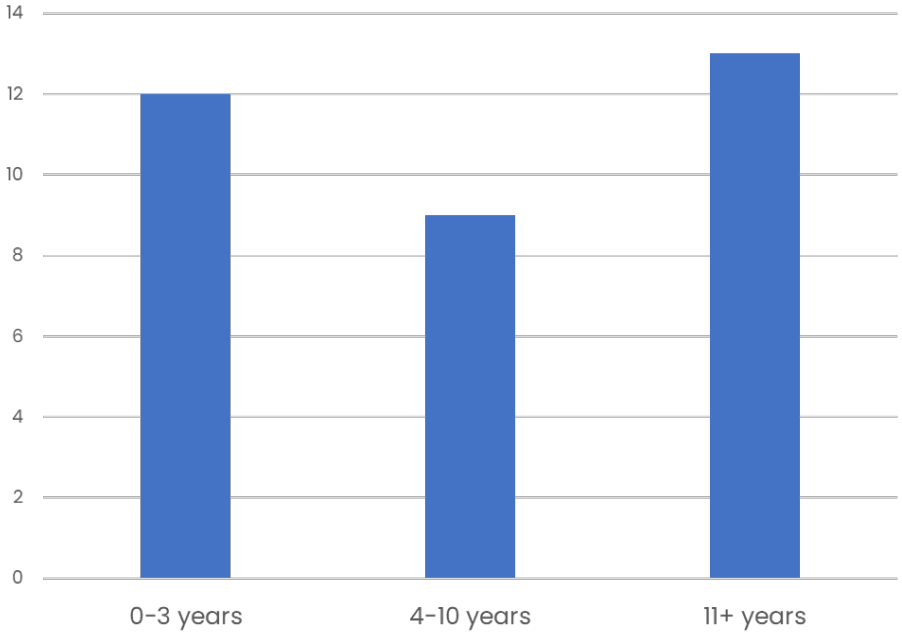
Q9. Are you familiar with Migratory Bird Joint Ventures?



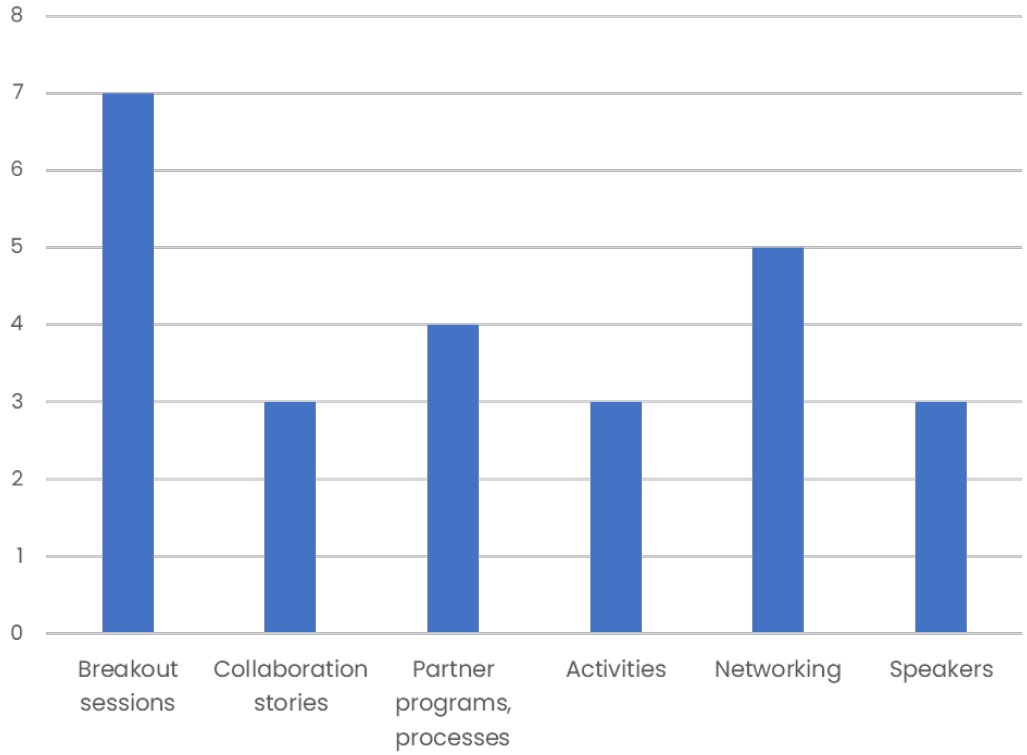
Q9a. If Yes, have you interacted with the Joint Venture in your region (Northern Great Plains Joint Venture or Prairie Pothole Joint Venture)?



Q10. How many years have you been working in private lands conservation?

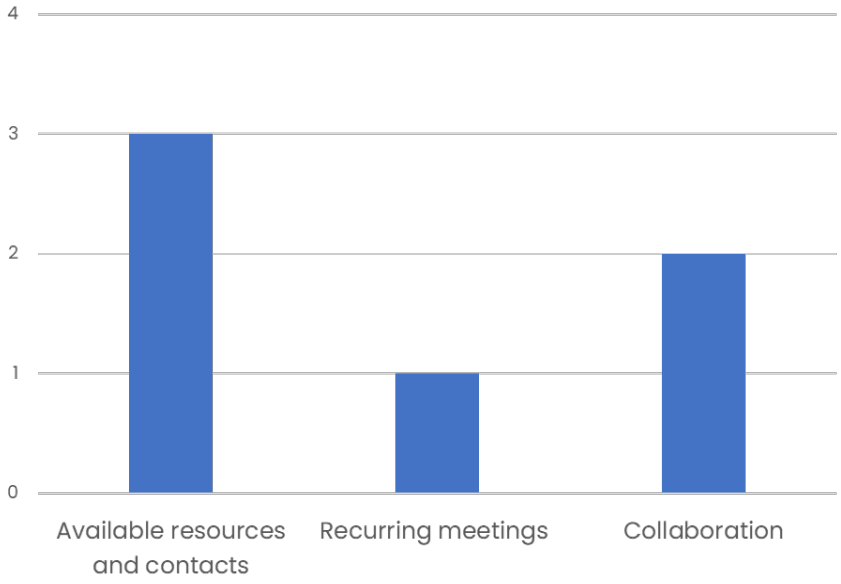


Q11. What would make the SD Private Lands Biologist Forum most informative for you? (Ex. Specific topics, keynote speaker, breakout sessions, activities, etc.)



Other answers: panels (anonymous question option, open mic with leadership to talk about what biologists are seeing in the field), partnership missions and opportunities (how do partners complement each other? Where can collaboration happen? Career paths, mentorship), how to support the voice, choice, and action of producers.

Q12. Is there anything else you would like to share that might help us improve the long-term impact of this event for attendees?



Other comments: a resource to refer back to after the forum, recurring meetings that are smaller, virtual, annual, themed, or moved around the state, making sure we enable conservation (make it easy and make it happen often).

Appendix B: Breakout Session Notes

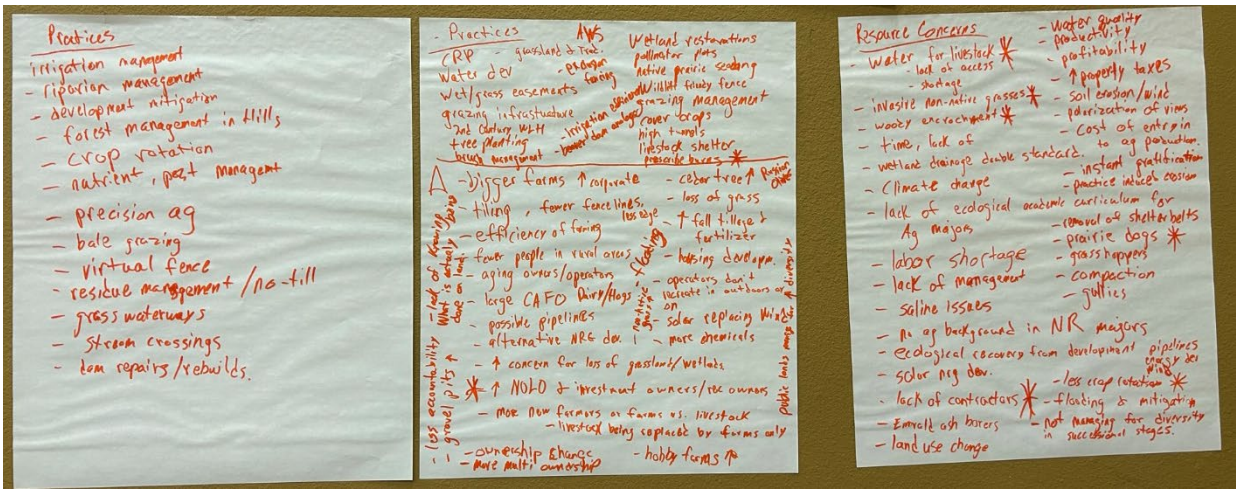


Figure 4. Landscape trends and resource concerns.

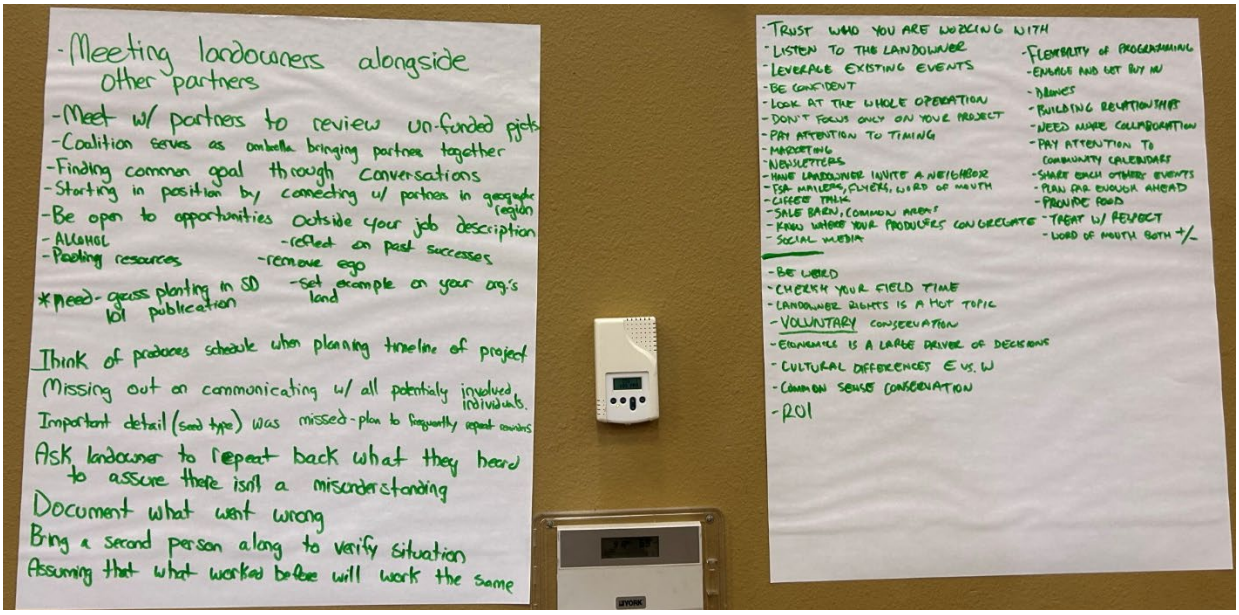


Figure 5. Successes and failures in the field; sharing stories.

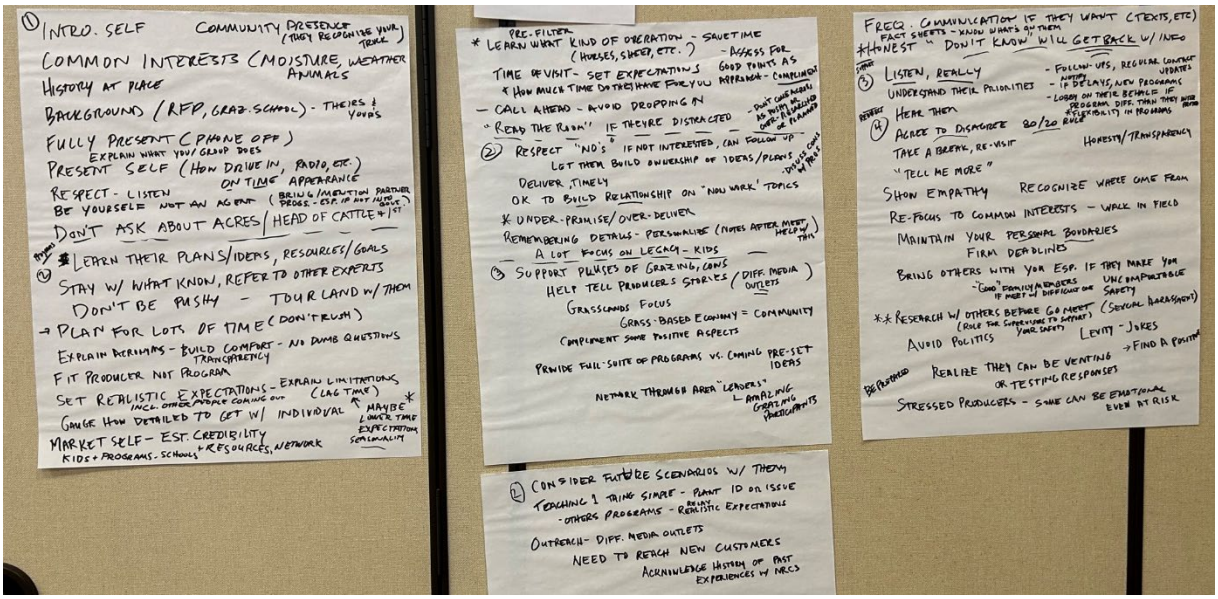


Figure 6. Tips for talking with landowners.

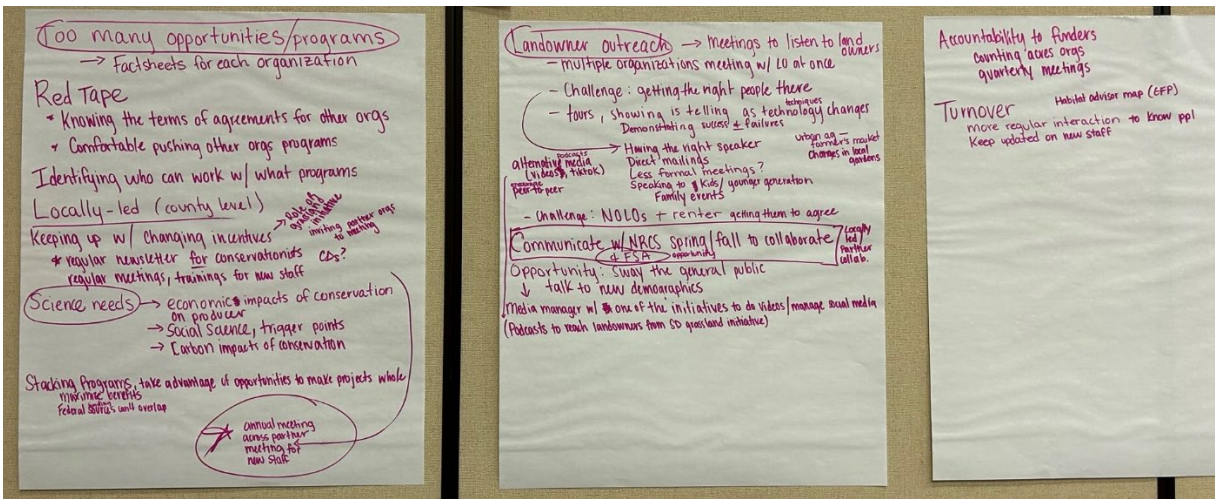


Figure 7. Current challenges and potential opportunities for collaboration.

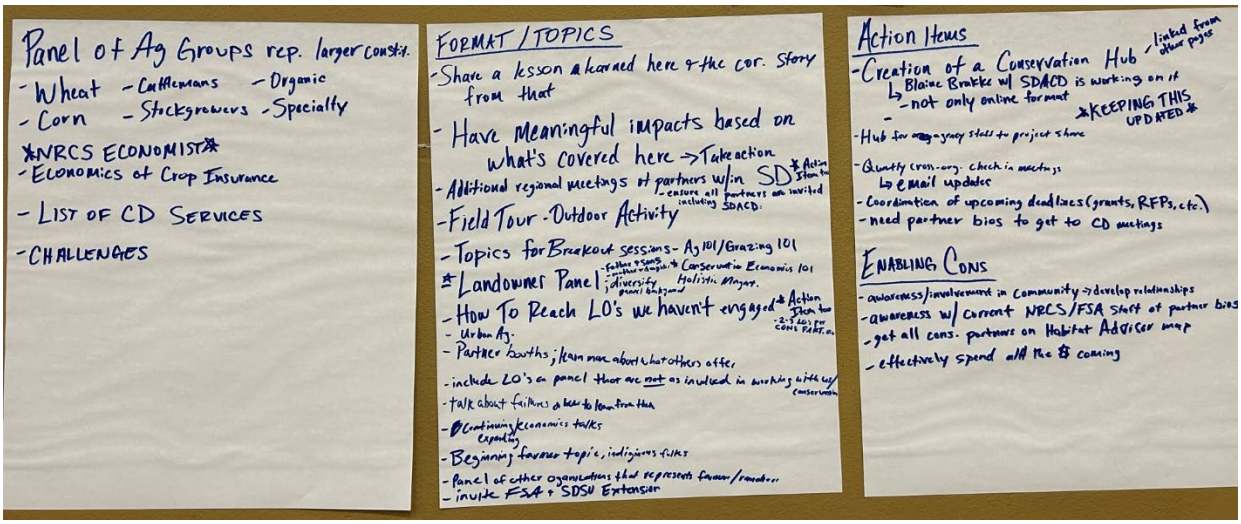
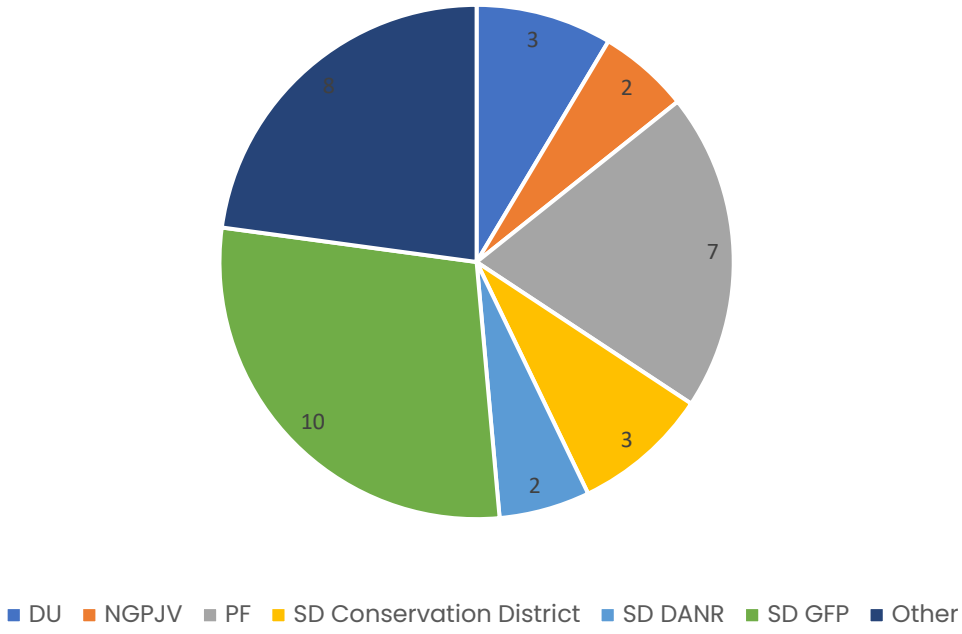


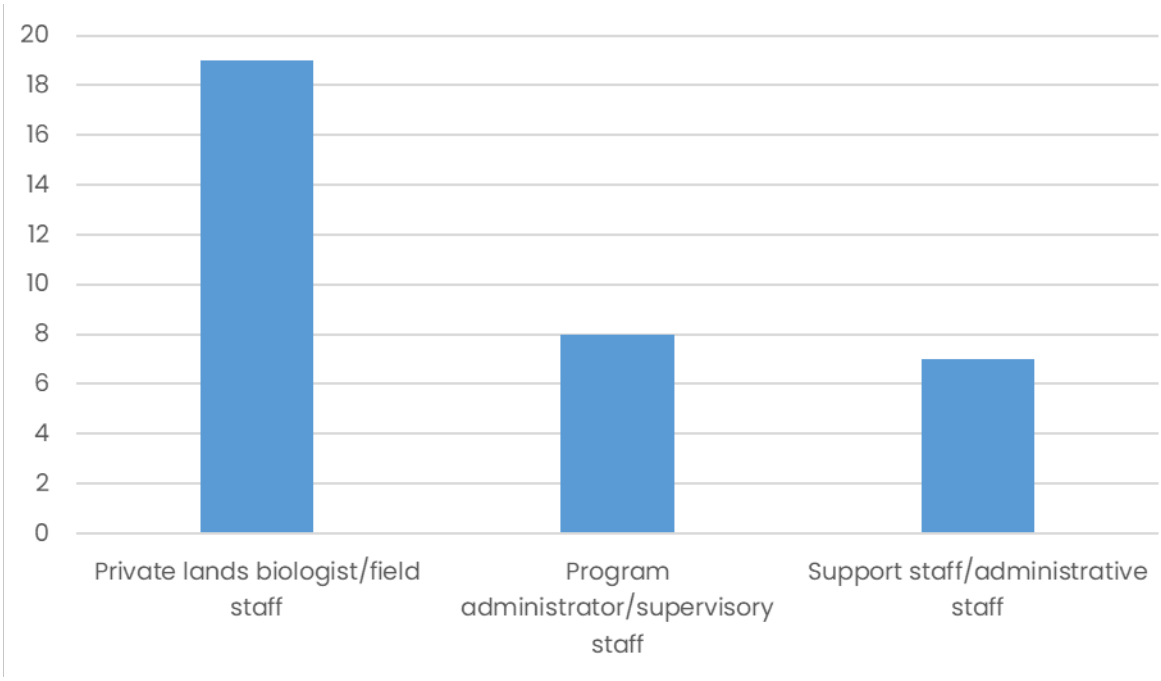
Figure 8. How do we keep this momentum going?

Appendix C: Post-Forum Survey Results

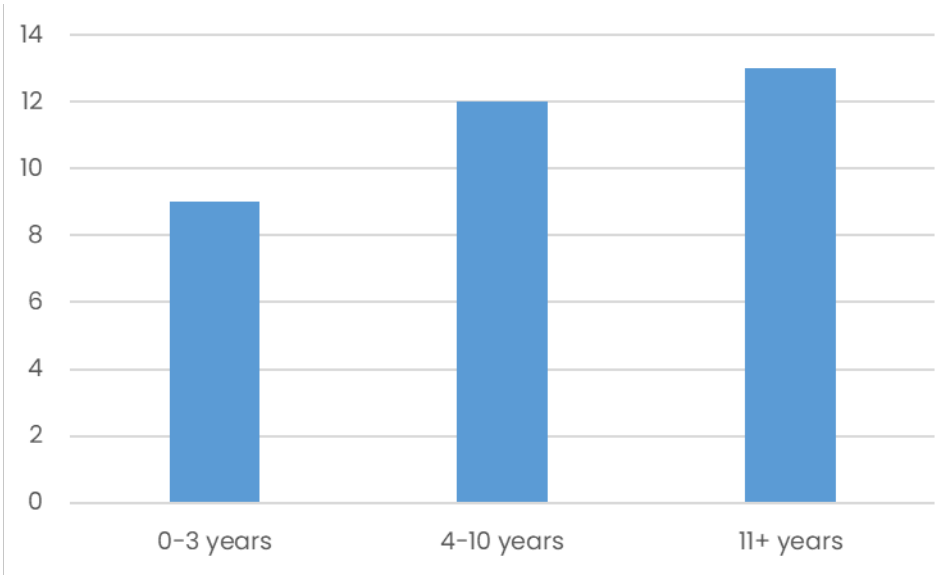
Q1. Please list your agency or organization below:



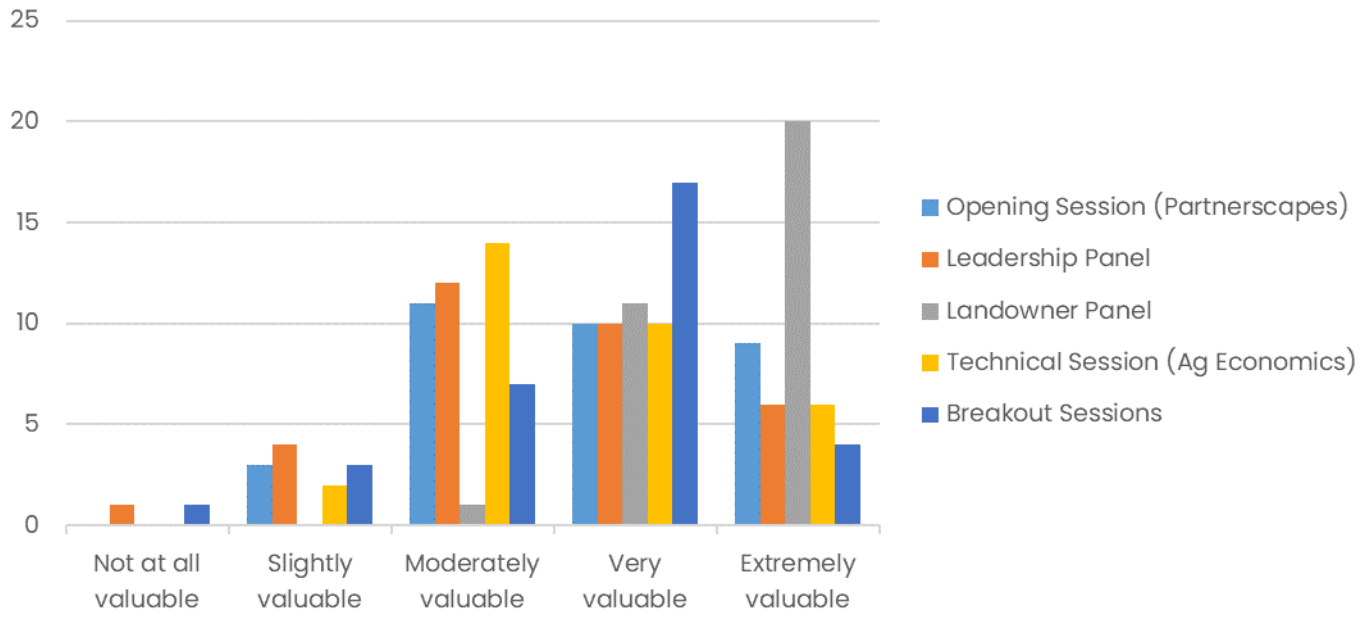
Q2. What title best describes your position?



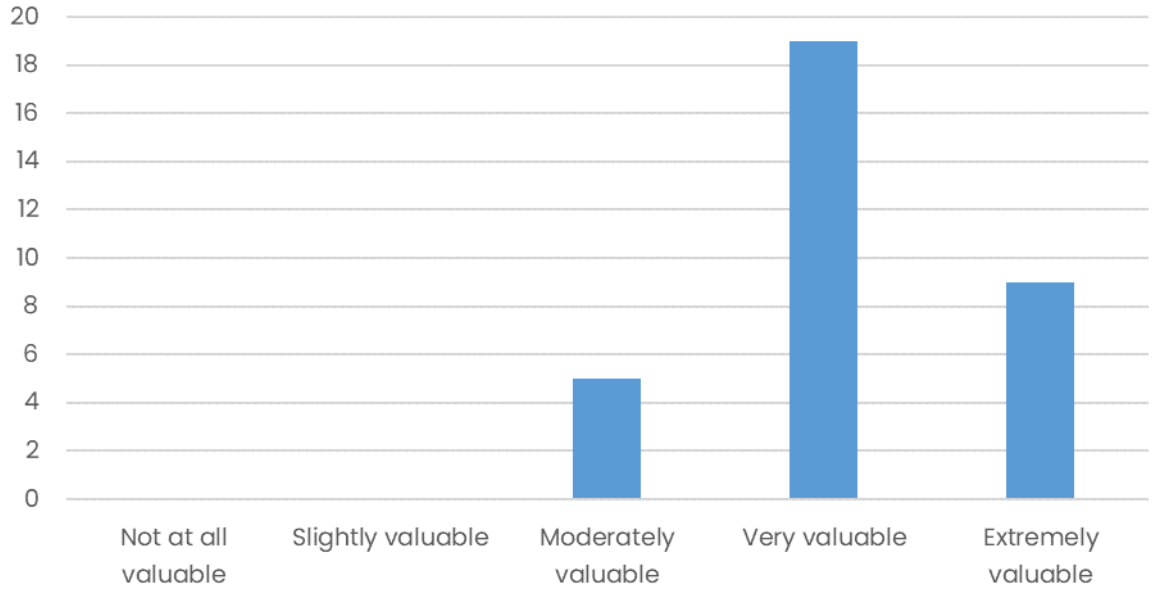
Q3. How many years have you been working in private lands conservation?



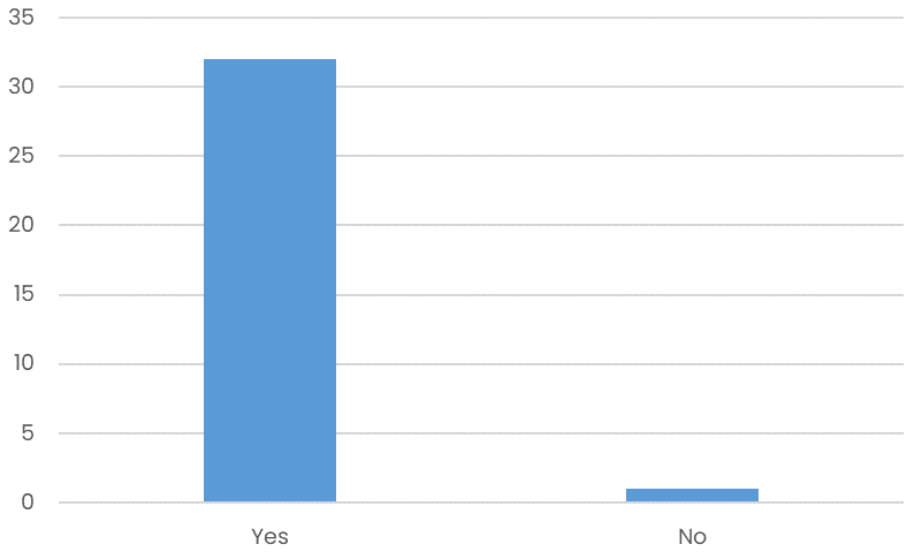
Q4. How valuable did you find the following sessions? Please rate reach session below:



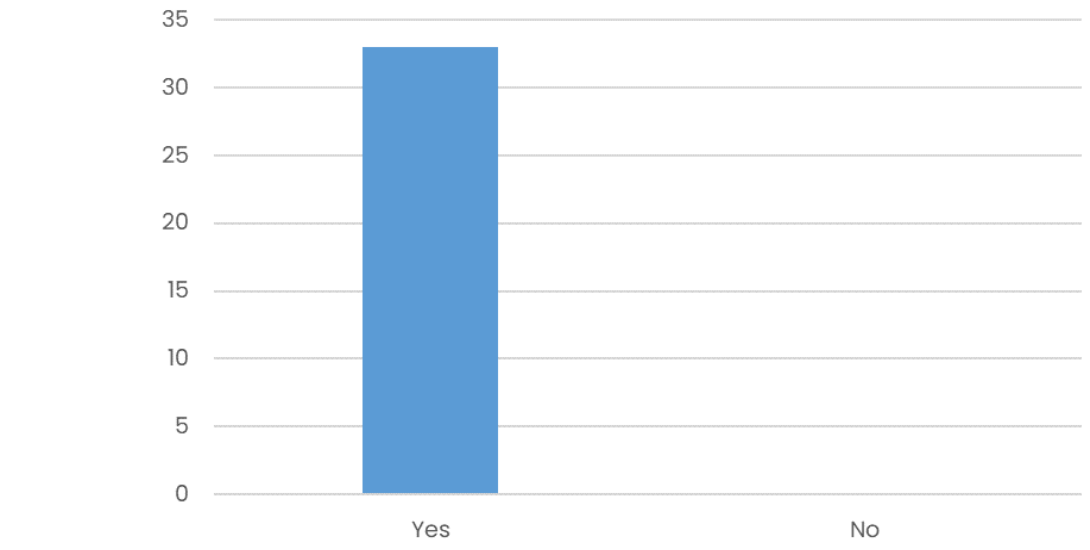
Q5. How valuable did you find the 2023 SD Private Lands Biologist Forum overall?



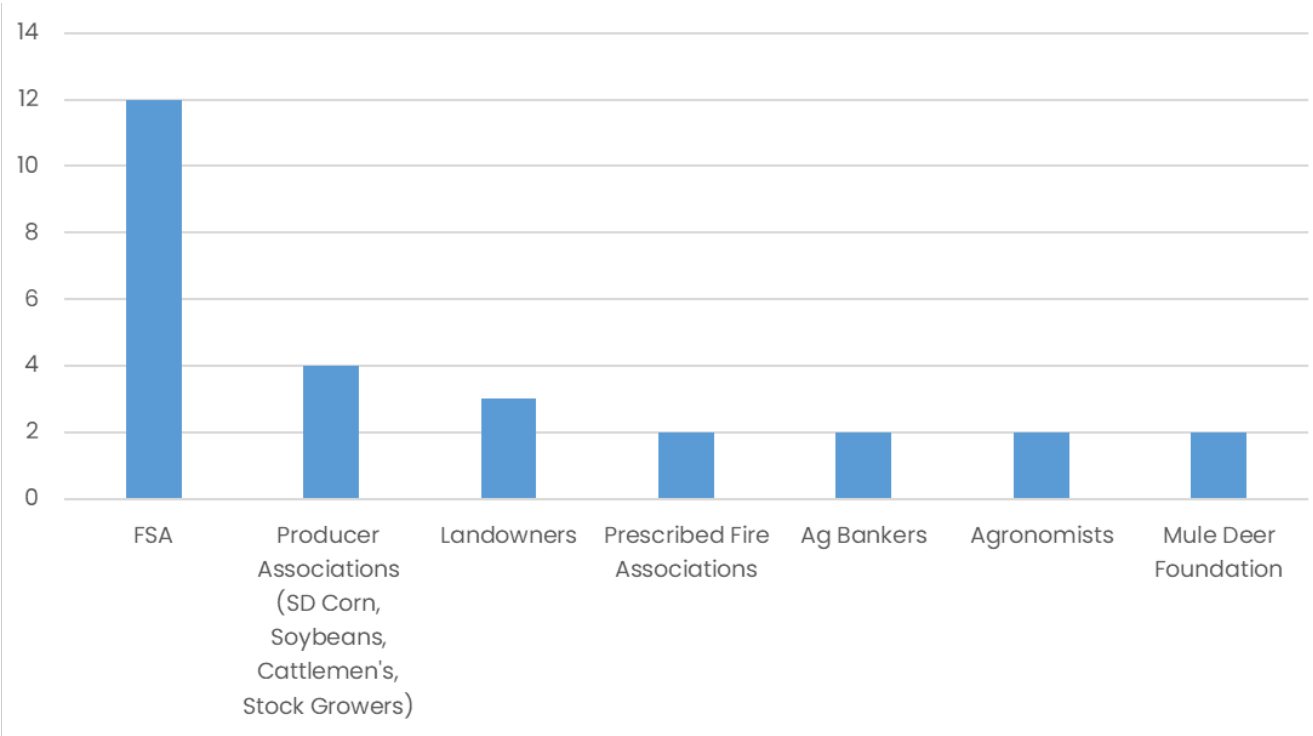
Q6. Did you connect with new partners in your region at the 2023 SD Private Lands Biologist Forum?



Q7. Did you connect with new partners in the state at the 2023 SD Private Lands Biologist Forum?

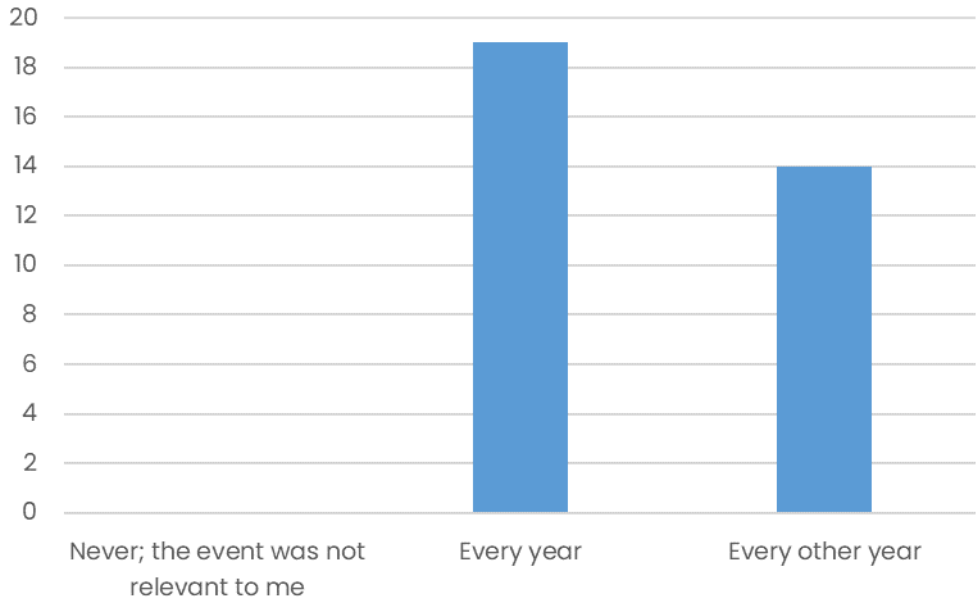


Q8. What organizations were missing from the 2023 SD Private Lands Biologist Forum?

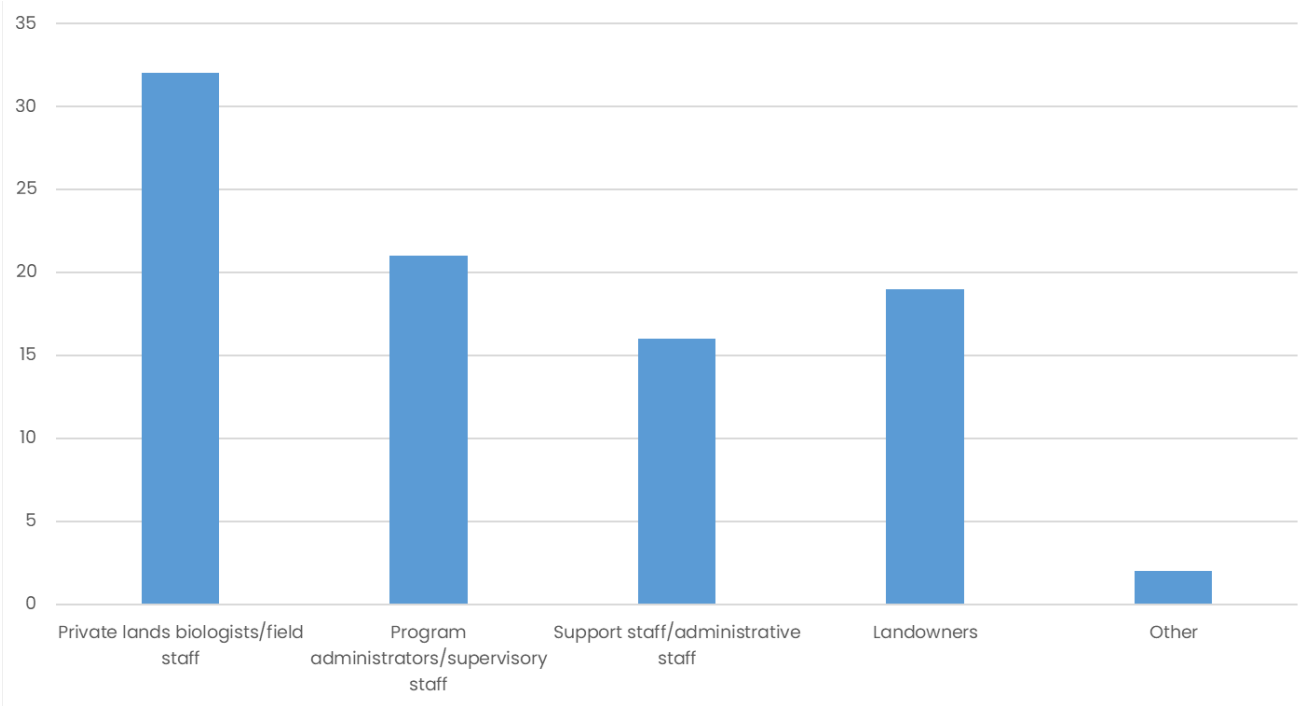


Other answers: crop insurers, sportsmen's clubs, Tribes, Bee and Butterfly Habitat Fund, policy makers, 319 project coordinators, private industry contractors, and NRCS.

Q9. Moving forward, how often would you participate in a statewide event like the SD Private Lands Biologist Forum?

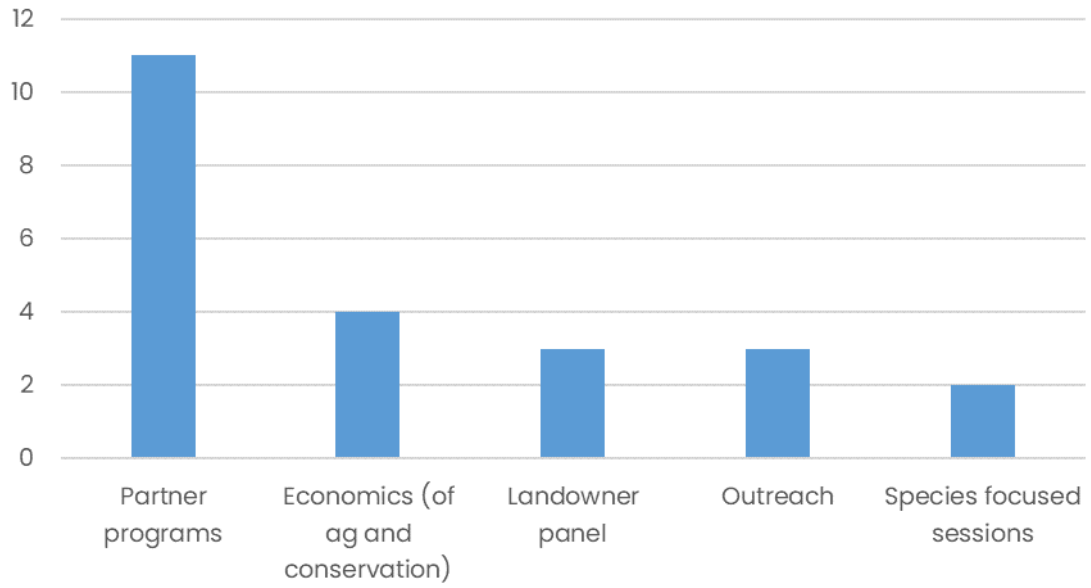


Q10. Who should be the primary audience at future events like the SD Private Lands Biologist Forum?



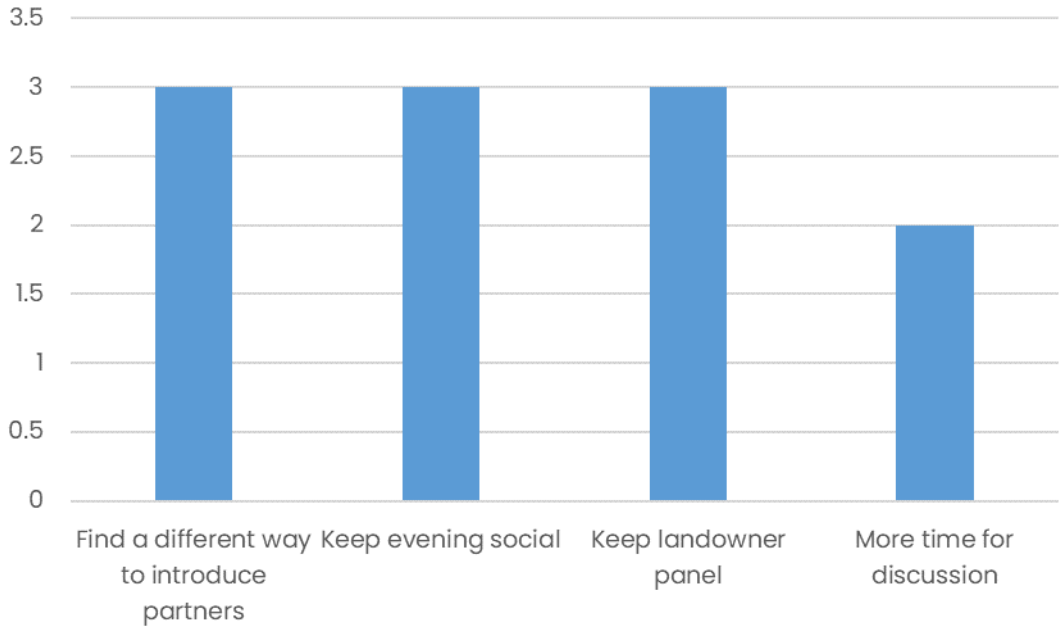
Other answers: policy makers.

Q11. What format and/or topics do you want to see at future events like the SD Private Lands Biologist Forum?



Other answers: field session, landscape focused sessions, Tribal leader panel, ag banker panel, policy, prescribed fire, brainstorming session for innovative planning and conservation.

Q12. Please provide any final comments on the format and/or topics of the 2023 SD Private Lands Biologist Forum. What did you like? What would you change?



Other answers: keep breakout sessions, provide an anonymous question option for all presentations, keep economics session, invite universities, keep leadership panel, more focus on sharing priorities and interaction between groups, shorten to one full day and one half day.

Appendix D: Budget

The costs for the South Dakota Private Lands Biologist Forum, which included venue rental fees, food, materials, and speaker fees, totaled $23,808.92. Partner contributions totaled $12,050. The remaining balance was paid through an NGPJV National Fish and Wildlife Foundation award. To encourage participation from as many organizations as possible, no registration fee was charged. A travel reimbursement of one night's hotel stay could be requested by Conservation District attendees.

Table 1. 2023 South Dakota Private Lands Biologist Forum budget table.

Item	**Cost**
Venue rental fees	$2,708.10
Meals and snacks	$11,075.99
Speaker fees and travel reimbursements	$8,104.07
Materials	$1,077.24
Partner travel reimbursements	$843.52