System Mapping Work

North Star Statement

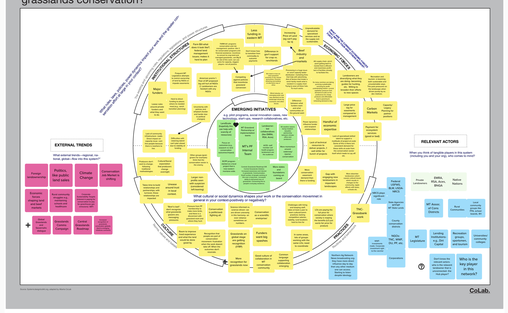
How do we mobilize ourselves — as practitioners, partners, and stewards — to conserve grasslands at the scale and complexity required to sustain and enhance ecological function?

1 Before we engage in mapping, what symptoms — positive or negative — are you or others experiencing that signal deeper forces at play in the system *(e.g. Workforce challenges)?*

- Staff burnout and uncertainty about jobs and future of conservation
- Retaining and recruiting talent has been hard
- Frustrations of a new govt employee to deliver a project. Understanding that with or will not happen. Frustrating new employees...on attraction and retention
- Competition between organizations for funding or workshops
- The business side impacts organizational decisions re: funding
- Mega funders, top down approach: we think we know what is needed and funders address big problems- dont do a good job of listening and understanding re: what is needed.
- Mismatch between big change from funders and what practitioners at play.
- Better understand from a landowner perspective what is needed to be a grass based economy.
- Has to be a certain standard of grassbeds. Different landowners have different ideas things better than they are.
- Rather then build and switch projects, why dont we trust local groups to do goals. Here is thing to do this. Build abecentralized trust based process.
- Administration priorities are changing- what these offices can and cannot do is changing. Forest management policies have changed dramatically.
- Different conversations- co-habitating- unaware of other programs, augmenting what is a really good process, good- inaccessible.
- This "green hushing" companies and supply chain actors are stepping back from talking about ESG other systems (symptom of political)
- Federal reduction in workforce- implication this has on the ability to develop agreements and shepard- ing them through bottlenecks. Delay possibilities
- 1996 USDA Large complex- forest service- building is empty now. Almost no one.
- Supply to meet demand decreasing.

2

Current State: Framing the System-What are the forces that support or hinder actors in pursuing grasslands conservation?



3 *"Which forces on this map have the greatest influence—those that ripple to other parts and shape much of the system AND are key to addressing the N. Star question?*

- Scale of opportunity for a good life in Montana
- Better quality of life for attraction and retention- this requires collective effort.
- LOcal dynamics are important- silos have to recognize national state shifting priorities- Outside in forces that connect to our ability to get to our system
- Culture and inst structure huge disrespect of grassland based jobs- viewed as entry level- top to bottom effort...
- Best employees promote out of the biome.
- Lobby funders and show what it isnt working. More on private side alot more ability to influence.
- Project $ to staff $- capacity 5 projects.
- Communication and trust
- Conservation orgs themselves- with landowners different combinations
- Often by within each NGO to do everything and we end up overlapping. What is the ask? Ask should not doesnt repeat- coordinate and collaborate to find the synergies well. We will support this well. Rather than separate parallel.
- Entities are all struggling for relevancy.
  As a producer this would be a wonderful model.
- Can make it happen if we really need. Producers back on us to make happen.
- Trust in relationships and what you know.
  A tug between competition between resources and recognition to collaborate.
- Every effort to sustain and involve takes the special thing away and makes it worse- worse
- Cognitiv overload- too many things on- have to actually hold alot of this.
  Inertia- gotten so used to working in silos it takes alot of work to invent new pattern of working. Convoluted efforts is here.
  No bonus points to contribute to existing- alot of semi comparable with branding- incentives at play!
  The NEW BEST THING IS VALUED
- Add- cultural and social- also a real big component. Not just two groups working together- acknowledgement a counter movement.
- Not just limited to NGOs
  Several silos- across the board need improvement.
- Same time hearing from funders, concern that our work in grasslands isnt coordinated enough. Funders want coordination and important to fund. Individually.
  Tension between top down big i want to make a difference- vs. the reality of what is actually happening fo so big!Could not fathom differences in scale...
- NGO Work- parallel efforts- work with communication and better- step NGO work together- Ranchers- work and over- How do we working better together- gatekeeper conservation
- Federal uncertainty & policy constraints
  - Key driver, but now difficult to work with. Shifting priorities- forces and not in a good position.
  - Reliance/ dependence on govt funding- big- big risk (6 million funders)
  - Government Affairs groups in TNC, WWF, pf
  - We are Connected to local communities- and their stories
- Beef Markets
  - Profitability of cropland vs. ranchland
  - Marketing drive to consumer/end consumer- certification- Ranchers are tired of hearing of loads of bull
  - Education about marketing
- Collaboratives (e.g., MT Grassland Partnership & landowner-led efforts)
  - Challenges re: traditional funding that supports these efforts
  - Getting funders onboard
  - Support for housing/ schools
  - Local collaboration- backing- Ranchers- coming from in to Pitz collaborative- Dillon
  - Larger NGOs- have fundraisers and local staff- Ranchers have the stories
- Top-down funding vs. bottom-up driven
  - Spending lots of time trying to convince the funders- what they want
- Roses Buds and Thorns

4

ROSE	Map of all of us and what roles are and areas of expertise- outcome and provide and connection- Ecosystem Service Inventory- make a picture and infographic/map...easy to understand- Ecosystem Service conservation menu. Data and visualizion. Powerful skill.	Landowner collaboratives- challenge AND what we can do to foster the interest in where we may work together. Practices in new areas...	What appears to be a increased interest in grassland conservation- could be carbon driven- desire to do something in landscape - where can help drive.	Science translation staff- montana grasslands group- connect science and implementation.	MT Grassland Partnership	Atmosphere of conservation in MT is good	More Grassbanks	New Marketing Initiatives (using local animal byproducts, GRANGE)	Grassland education (financial, people, and grassland function)
BUD	Gaps filling and a lower cost approach to filling the enhanced map. Talking about all of the players. what are the missing parts. Areas of coverage who see serve- use images. themes of issues.	Pivoting the conservation menu to get it as something.	Scale to serve who we do have as a captive audience already then other...	Ecosystem service markets- focus on carbon- trading to- intangible services provided by- private sector- cattle rarely way- some of the other services offered by grassland- creating new market	Collaborating around development of fundraising	LandScale	Collaboratives testifying on bills (can make changes at that scale)	New Marketing Initiatives (using local animal byproducts)	More grassland awareness (people are talking but to what end)
THORN	Scale back need to prune back and adjust their scope...	Jointly drive takes away individualism- this is the secret sauce here.	Dont wnent to leave out individual ranchers that dont have a home yet. Alot of great people doing great work-allow individual players to thrive.	Private sector investment in this- links back to greenwashing- step forward in this space.	Federal policy and uncertainty (FB changes)	Hiring staff that are interested in going to thes communities/ workload with training and onboarding	HIRING x 2 (not enough framework to be successful- hiring lots of biologists)	Economic drivers of conversion	Discussion around AP has made it harder for larger nonprofits

More connection now with big funders and people (relationships are being shared)	ROSE and THORN Big 4 Packers	Wind development, Gas development, Carbon storage
Ranch Media		

Rose: "What feels promising or generative from the system, and could be scaled to move the group towards addressing the N. Star? (focus on existing work). These are existing strengths, relationships, or initiatives that already support the North Star and could become platforms for broader collective effort.

Bud: What is emerging or holds potential but needs energy to be unleashed or unlocked? (focus on new possibilities). These are emerging ideas, shifts, or early signals that could become meaningful pathways toward the North Star if the system organized differently around them.

Thorn: What tensions or constraints feel sharp and immovable? (focus on barriers that need to be faced by a collaborative). are tensions or inhibitors that slow progress. Even if they can't be fully removed, they show where collaboration might build resilience or mitigate impact.

Forces at Play in the System- Summary

Emerging Initiatives & Opportunities
- LandScale and focus on outcomes can help increase funding and resources
- MT Grassland Partnership + PF Internal Team focused on strategic conservation
- Landowner-led initiatives create sustainability and investments in communities
- Increasing recognition of grasslands at regional/national scales
- New collaborative pilots and communication campaigns
- Growing interest in eco-tourism, sustainable food production and retail, etc.

Economic & Funding Dynamics
- Funding cycles that are short, unpredictable, or driven by top-down priorities
- Market pressures on producers affecting land-use decisions
- Financial instability affecting organizational and workforce capacity
- Increasing costs that are not matched by increases in funding sources
- Market pressures on producers affecting land-use decisions

Institutional & Policy Dynamics
- Uncertainty with policies, priorities, funding, and whiplash due to political shifts
- Workforce challenges: agency vacancies, difficulties retaining staff, reduced capacity, and slow processes
- Permitting and administrative delays that slow implementation
- Competing policies (federal and state): for croplands/against grassland conservation

Cultural & Social Dynamics
- Challenges with change for producers
- Takes time to build trust and relationship with producers, yet turnover impacts progress & Varying levels of trust among producers, NGOs, and agencies
- Messaging isn't working and is creating disconnects from the larger goal of conservation
- Big NGOs not accepted/greenwashing which limits possibilities for local progress and momentum
- Polarized narratives around conservation and agriculture

Practices & Ways of Working
- Project-based work leading to stop–start cycles
- Fragmented communication across groups- Lived Experience and the Science Community not in unison
- Difficulty sustaining long-term collaboration
- Good culture of collaboration and more recognition of grassland value ++
- More absentee landowners; not reaching new landowners; and associated impacts on local communities

Workforce & Practical Capacity
- Shortages of skilled staff and contractors
- Burnout, turnover, and limited housing for workers
- Limited time and bandwidth to plan or coordinate across efforts

Cross-Cutting Themes (from Ali's group)
- External trends impacting cost of business/funding model that are impacting conservation supply chain
- Political whiplash and uncertainty is creating significant pressures for conservation staff, impeding progress
- Landowner-led conversations, global to regional grassland conservation awareness, and culture of collaboration are anchors in a sea of change

Example of Forces in Action

Top-down funding priorities *can push big, splashy initiatives that don't always match local realities. At the same time, reduced federal workforce capacity slows agreements and delays implementation. Even when projects do move forward, limited skilled staff at scattered locations mean producers aren't sure where to get help. These delays and gaps make progress look slow, which funders interpret as something to solve through even more top-down direction to drive what they see as universal issues or gaps— creating a reinforcing cycle.*

Frequent political change *affects policies, funding, and relationships making it difficult to find a continuum for collaboration and progress. Ripple affects are numerous including challenges with accessing funding; workforce instability, e.g., recruiting/retaining talent, burnout; breakdown of trust in communities due to positions that change or move; competition and green-washing that prevents partnerships. These delays and gaps impede progress and recreate a cycle of dependency on top-down sources of funding and support or silos to get things done without scaling for impact.*

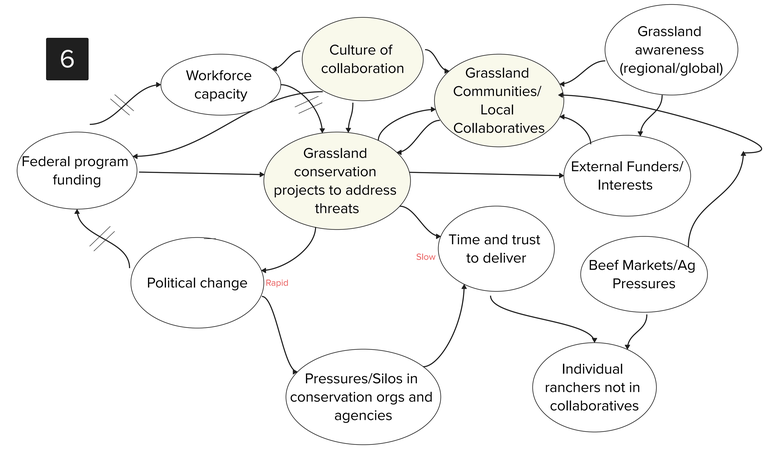
5 Where is the system stuck in ways no single actor can shift alone — and where might shared movement start to matter

- All of the thorns
- Federal and State policy (more possibilities vs. economic side)
- Increase collaborative fundraising and elevate the buds by building trust together (e.g., NFWF grants)
- Our own time and capacity (have these great meetings and then go back to our lanes-how to keep these convos going?)
- "We have to keep the convos going for eternity." K.M.

PDF

System View: Points of Leverage

6



This map shows us that progress in grassland conservation depends not only on what we do, but on the conditions that surround the work. Collaboration, workforce capacity, funding structures, rancher realities, organizational pressures, and the availability of time and trust all interact to shape whether momentum builds or stalls.

When these conditions line up — when capacity is stable, communication is strong, partners are aligned, and funders' expectations fit the work — progress accelerates. When any one of these tightens or fragments, the whole system feels the effect. The story this map tells is that conservation outcomes are the product of interactions, not isolated actions.

Understanding these dynamics helps us see where there is room for influence: places where coordinated effort can counter the forces that typically slow progress. Our goal is not to map the entire complexity, but to identify where this group can create meaningful movement within it.

System Dynamic 1: Reinforcing Feedback Loop- Collaboration ↔ Capacity ↔ Trust

Dynamic 1 is a reinforcing loop. When capacity is strong, collaboration improves. When collaboration improves, trust grows. And when trust grows, the ability to do good work expands.

But this loop runs in both directions: when capacity drops or pressure increases, collaboration tightens, trust erodes, and it becomes harder to deliver.

This is a classic reinforcing feedback loop — small shifts in either direction ripple outward in meaningful ways.

System Dynamic 2: Delay Functions: Time & Trust Lag Behind Action

Another dynamic showcases *delay*. In this system, trust and time don't respond instantly to actions. You can invest in collaboration or hire staff, but the benefits show up later — sometimes months or years later. Meanwhile, the effects of pressure, funding changes, or turnover show up immediately.

So this system has built-in lag: it takes time to build the conditions for progress, but very little time for those conditions to erode.

This delay helps explain why the system can feel fragile even when good work is happening.

System Dynamic 3: External Forces vs. Local Influence

The third dynamic is the interplay between external forces and local influence. Federal funding cycles, market pressures, and political shifts sit outside this group's control — but they shape nearly everything downstream.

The map helps reveal where influence still lives even in the face of these externalities: in the connective tissue — how collaboratives share knowledge, how capacity is supported, how relationships are maintained, and how the work adapts to shifting conditions.

So while we can't change markets or federal policy, we *can* strengthen the conditions that determine how well the system absorbs those shocks.

7 Given what this map is showing us, where do you think we could put effort that would interrupt or shift the patterns that usually slow things down?"

- Enhance communication and collaboration
- Break down silos/shift culture of this work
- Leadership that's truly supportive of collaboration or leading ourselves
- Formal structure development to rewire things
- Nudge those that have power to do things differently (like funders)
- Clarify where the gaps are (le funders knowing where the needs are)
- Addressing the ranchers not involved in the collaboratives
- Disproportionate value of private lands biologist known to 3 people- focus strong in and pulling them out
- Failures in topdown decisions without local input
- Formal structures can also drive people away and limit creativity (other ways to gather lke coffee chats)

Strategies and Actions

8

DRAFT Strategies

We will mobilize ourselves — as practitioners, partners, and stewards — to conserve grasslands at the scale and complexity required to sustain and enhance ecological function in 2026 by working collectively on the following strategies and actions.

	Promote system understanding, learning, and adaptation			Strengthen/increase local collaboratives and associated efforts			Coordinate to address workforce challenges and capacity needs			Develop shared marketing, comms, and outreach initiatives (proactive messaging)			Collaborate on fundraising to support priority actions across Central & Eastern MT		
Priority Actions	**EX: Implement LandScale**	Level capacity for practitioners to collaborate better and to better interface with the larger dynamics.	Continuing this collaborative effort- next step to see if we are learning into this.	**EX: Map the collaboratives, conservation entities, and LCI- element to identify gaps and to allocate resources**	Can we create new value for participants in collaborative effort moving forward?	Create a joint name, brand, regular meeting cadence				The joint evaluation of grant can turn into a joint messaging- share with funders and general public			**EX. Host the 2026 funders tour to demonstrate collaboration, shared priorities, outcomes, and coordinated messages re: funding**	Evaluate as a group to assess funding ask- jointly (weaver?) Assessment/feedback/ evaluate is point. Next step- Chris send info. - who wants to be involved.	Back to Lonesome to discuss funding ask- Chris, Ali, Jeff, Kelly, Tyler, Matthew, Jeff Kelly Matthew, Jeff Kelly Kelly Tyler Chris Jeff Kelly Tyler Chris Jeff Kelly Tyler Chris Jeff