

## **Targeted Implementation Plan: The Long-billed Curlew as a Focal Species for Improving Livestock Forage on Rangelands with High Grassland Bird Densities**

**Nate Reid\* & Jessica Howell | Northern Great Plains Conservation Specialists**

American Bird Conservancy working in Partnership with Natural Resource Conservation Service

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*\*Primary Contact*



*Photo by Tim Zurowski/ABC*

## Summary

The objective of this TIP is to use the Long-billed Curlew as a focal species to increase grassland bird habitat in Southeastern Montana. The goal is to create, maintain, and enhance curlew habitat by implementing prescribed grazing on **18,000** acres of rangeland, and returning **320** acres of cropland to diverse perennial vegetation. Not only will this outcome provide better habitat for grassland birds, it will also provide private landowners with the opportunity to implement conservation practices on their land, improve range health, and increase awareness and knowledge of Long-billed Curlews and other grassland birds. The primary resource concern for this project is **Terrestrial Habitat for Wildlife and Invertebrates**, with two additional concerns being **Plant Structure and Composition** and **Plant Productivity and Health**. We would request that NRCS provide \$948,420, the total estimated cost for this project, which will be offered over a total of three years (fiscal years 2024 – 2026).

## Geographic Focus

The project area, consisting of 709,682 acres in both Custer and Powder River Counties, can be seen in Figure 1. The project area was delineated by examining intact native grassland (WWF Plowprint data), a Long-billed Curlew habitat focus area (Montana Natural Heritage Program data), and endemic songbird species richness (US Fish and Wildlife Service data). The boundary was then set in order to encompass an area that would overlap the three parameters, providing us with the best chance to increase curlew, and other grassland bird species, habitat.

## Resource Concern

Terrestrial Habitat for Wildlife and Invertebrates is the primary resource concern to be addressed through this TIP. Throughout the Northern Great Plains, the loss of native grassland/rangeland to conversion for agriculture, industrial, and developmental purposes has resulted in a decrease in grassland bird numbers, impacting populations of Long-billed Curlews along with many other species. Additionally, decreased plant diversity from monoculture croplands and pasturelands has been shown to reduce bird abundance, species richness, and species diversity (Shaffer and DeLong, 2019). 108,314 acres of

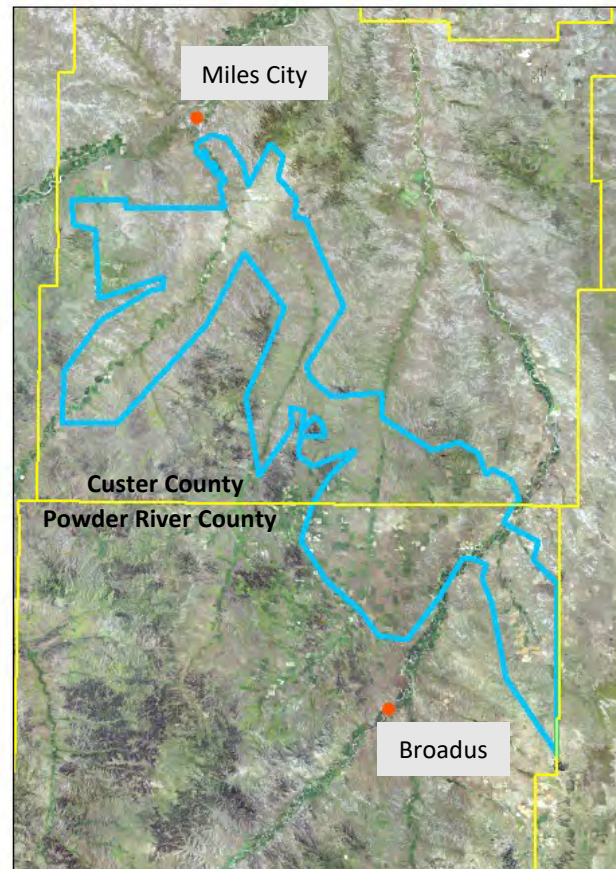


Figure 1. Map of TIP boundary

intact grassland have already been converted in Powder River and Custer Counties, and an additional 54,708 acres of currently intact grassland are on soil suitable for crop production and have a high risk of conversion (Northern Great Plains Joint Venture 2019).

Additional resource concerns include Plant Structure and Composition and Plant Productivity and Health. Poorly managed grasslands are less productive and tame hayfields lack the desired structure and composition for curlew habitat. The Long-billed Curlew prefers medium height grasses (10-30 cm) mixed with forbs (Casey 2013) and has shown preference to nest near cow pies (Clarke 2006). By implementing well-managed prescribed grazing on land within the TIP boundary, the already existing intact grassland will be better suited to fit the nesting and brood-rearing habitat desired by Long-billed Curlews, as well as other important grassland bird species.

Since the late 1800s, the Northern Great Plains have changed dramatically with the conversion of 51.3 million acres of grasslands to largely permanent and semi-permanent cropland agriculture. This conversion continues at a rate of 1.2 million acres of grass per year (USDA NASS, WWF Plowprint, see Gage et al. 2016). With this direct habitat loss, as well as decreases in habitat quality in fragmented habitat patches, grassland birds have shown some of the most dramatic population declines of any habitat-based group of North American birds (Rosenberg et al. 2019). For example, five species of songbirds (Baird's Sparrow, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Sprague's Pipit, Thick-billed Longspur, and Lark Bunting) endemic to the grasslands of the Great Plains (meaning they occur nowhere else in the world) have each declined between 65 and 88% since the populations were first measured in the 1960s. The only way to achieve conservation of grassland birds at meaningful scales is to engage private lands. Therefore, partnerships with private landowners resulting in implementation of practices beneficial to wildlife are key to the conservation of these species (Lipse et al. 2015).

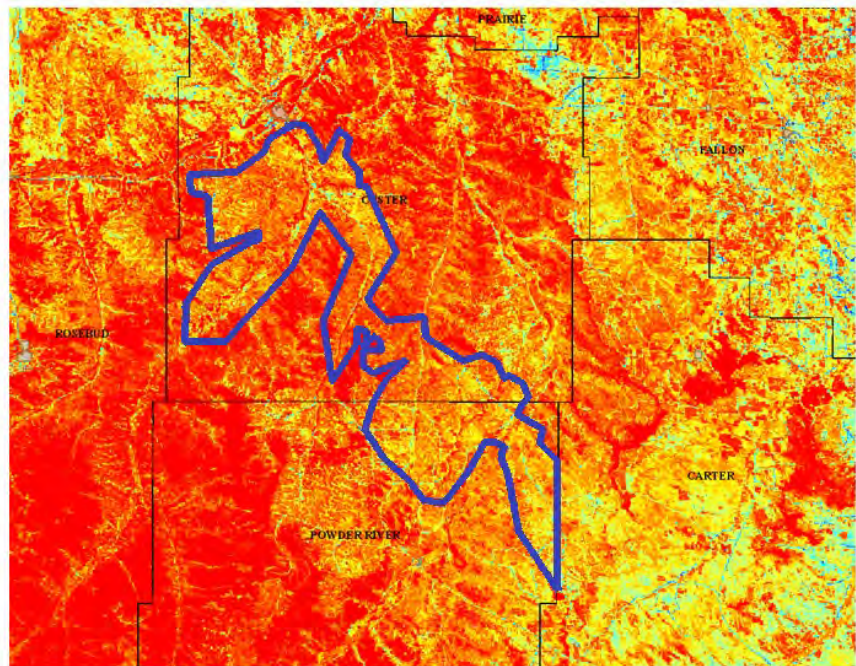
The Long Rang Plans for both Custer and Powder River counties state that primary resource concerns include Grazing-land Health (Degraded Plant Condition), Inadequate Livestock Water, and Wildlife Habitat. This TIP would provide funding for private landowners within the boundary to address these concerns through various conservation practices (See Alternatives below).

## Goals and Objectives

The goal of this TIP is to improve habitat quality and connectivity of Long-billed Curlew habitat on working agriculture lands. We aim to plan and implement prescribed grazing on **18,000 acres** of grassland/rangeland in order to improve the quality of existing habitat. Through implementation and outreach for this TIP, ABC and partners also expect to increase the awareness and knowledge of Long-billed Curlews and other grassland birds among private landowners, who manage most of the grassland in Montana (See landowner's guide in appendix). Another objective for this TIP is to create an increase in the amount of intact grassland/rangeland habitat by establishing an additional **320 acres** of perennial cover (ideally with predominantly native plants) through seeding. Keeping the existing acreage of

grassland/rangeland in perennial cover suitable for these grassland birds would be a successful step, with a long-term goal of increasing the total acreage of grassland/rangeland within the TIP area. Additional emphasis should be placed on sustaining these grasslands beyond the length of each conservation contract, through additional funding opportunities or as incentive for enrollment in other perennial cover programs with USDA.

An additional objective is for the TIP area to connect two areas of existing, high quality curlew habitat (Carter County and Northeast Rosebud County/Northwest Custer County), building a larger core area of curlew habitat and reducing habitat fragmentation (Figure 2).



*Figure 2. Map of TIP Boundary overlaid on model for Long-billed Curlew habitat suitability (Montana Natural Heritage Program 2022). Yellow areas signify more suitable habitat, red areas signify less suitable.*

## Alternatives

### Alternative 1 – Not Selected

*Fence (382), Livestock Pipeline(516), Pumping Plant (533), Watering Facility (614), Water Well (642)*

This alternative was not selected due to the lack of management required to establish, increase, or maintain wildlife habitat on the landscape. Prescribed Grazing is needed in order to establish proper ground cover and habitat conditions for grassland birds, especially the Long-billed Curlew. Planting is necessary to help convert land back to diverse perennial cover. Ultimately this alternative does would not meet the TIP habitat and vegetation objectives.

## Alternative 2 – **Selected Alternative**

*Prescribed Grazing (528), Range Planting (550), Pasture and Hay Planting (512), Fence (382), Livestock Pipeline (516), Pumping Plant (533), Water Well (642), Watering Facility (614), Aquifer Flow Test (224), Upland Wildlife Habitat Management (645)\**

*\*Conservation plans and practices will be developed under Upland Wildlife Habitat Management specifications, but NRCS will not provide financial assistance for this specific practice.*

This alternative was chosen because it best meets the TIP's objectives in a focused manner. Prescribed Grazing is key to the improvement of grazing-land health and wildlife habitat. Grazing strategies will be developed with participants to create positive rangeland trend and the desired vegetative structure for bird habitat. Prescribed grazing plans will focus on encouraging healthy, diverse stands of grass, including diversity of plant species and structural components across the landscape. Facilitating practices, such as Fence, Livestock Pipeline, and Watering Facilities, are needed to successfully implement a grazing strategy in the TIP area, as stock water and fence infrastructure are often limiting. Range Planting and Pasture and Hay Planting are important in converting land back to diverse perennial vegetation in order to further provide wildlife habitat. Native grass stands are the preferred habitat for the target species, so grass establishment would be aimed at achieving a diverse stand of native grasses whenever practical.

## Alternative 3 – **No Action**

Taking no action would likely result in the continued decline in habitat availability through conversion of rangeland to cropland, as well as the loss of habitat suitability through poorly managed grassland. Objectives of the TIP would not be accomplished. Habitat within the TIP area may remain fragmented and a corridor between the two high quality habitat areas would not be improved upon.

## **Implementation**

This TIP is proposed to last 3 years. Signups will begin in 2024 and continue through 2026. Contracts are expected to last 3 – 5 years depending on the extent of the facilitating practices that need to be installed. It is our hope, that with good planning, producers will choose to continue their prescribed grazing strategies beyond the life of the contract.

Based on recent EQIP contracts in both Custer and Powder River Counties, it is estimated that the average contract for this TIP will require around \$105,380 (Table 1). An estimated \$948,420 will be required to reach the goal of **18,000** acres of prescribed grazing and **320** acres planted back to perennial vegetation (Table 2).

Table 1 – Cost estimate for an average contract based on FY2023 payment rates.

Practice Code	Practice Name	Practice Component	Units	Cost/Unit	Planned Extent	Planned Cost
224	Aquifer Flow Test	Aquifer Flow Test	No	\$1,420.29	1	\$1,420.29
382	Fence	Barbed/Smooth Wire	Ft	\$2.39	10,560	\$25,238.40
512	Pasture and Hay Planting	Introduced Perennial & Native Grass Mix	Ac	\$81.74	25	\$2,043.50
516	Livestock Pipeline	Below Frost PVC, HDPE, IPS, PE	Ft	\$2.54	9,240	\$23,469.60
528	Prescribed Grazing	Habitat Management, Standard (3 year)	Ac	\$4.14	2,000	\$24,840.00
533	Pumping Plant	Electric Pump, less than 5 HP with Pressure Tank	HP	\$3,101.01	1	\$3,101.01
550	Range Planting	Native, Standard Preparation	Ac	\$90.29	25	\$2,257.25
614	Watering Facility	Permanent Drinking with Storage, 1,500-gallon tank (2)	Gal	\$2.59	3,000	\$7,770.00
642	Water Well	Typical Well, 100 to 600 foot depth with 4-inch Casing	Lnft	\$50.80	300	\$15,240.00
					<b>Total Project Cost</b>	<b>\$105,380.05</b>

Table 2 – EQIP funds required by fiscal year.

Fiscal Year	Expected Contracts	Expected Acres Treated	Average Expected Cost/Contract	Total Requested Funds
2024	1	2,050	\$105,380	\$105,380
2025	5	10,250	\$105,380	\$105,380
2026	3	6,150	\$105,380	\$316,140
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>18,450</b>		<b>\$948,420</b>

## Partnerships

- American Bird Conservancy (ABC)
- Pheasants Forever (PF)\*
- Bird Conservancy of the Rockies (BCR)\*
- Northern Great Plains Joint venture (NGPJV)\*
- World Wildlife Fund (WWF)\*
- Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (MTFWP)
- Custer County Conservation District (CCCD)\*
- Powder River Conservation District (PRCD)\*

*\*See attached letters of support*

ABC contributes technical assistance and a strong avian ecology background through Nate Reid, Northern Great Plains Conservation Specialist, who is based in the Miles City NRCS Field Office. ABC has compiled a wealth of information on the Long-billed Curlew, which is a flagship species for their Northern Great Plains program. ABC has participated in curlew tagging and monitoring in North and South Dakota, as well as helped implement a successful targeted EQIP project, also focusing on Long-billed Curlew, through the South Dakota NRCS that has successfully improved over 27,000 acres through prescribed grazing and over 800 acres through pasture and hay planting (A video going into detail about the project can be found at the South Dakota NRCS YouTube page, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjLizOdm4RA>). ABC staff are also looking into funding opportunities to expand their Long-billed Curlew survey program – currently primarily in Southwestern North Dakota – into Southeast Montana, which would strengthen monitoring efforts and provide further local insights into this species.

NGPJV provides technical information on priority grassland birds, including Sprague's Pipit, Lark Bunting, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Thick-billed Longspur and Baird's Sparrow, in addition to information on larger, regional grassland initiatives and planning tools. NGPJV delivers the Northern Grassland Restoration Incentive Program (N-GRIP), which provides financial assistance to producers interested in implementing practices that benefit native grasslands and grassland birds. The N-GRIP cost-share application is available to producers within the project area.

MTFWP administers a well-established Private Lands Habitat Program through which it can provide technical and financial assistance to producers interested in implementing rangeland management practices within the project area. MTFWP programs will be available as needed to complement efforts described in this proposal.

WWF has partnered to offer their Ranch Systems Viability Planning (RSVP) monitoring services for producers who are interested in advancing their existing monitoring through adaptive management that relies on the ranch's collected data.

BCR and PF have both offered to provide technical assistance, as well as coordinated outreach. PF and BCR have partnered on a regional RCPP focused on seeding marginally productive lands back to grass.

## **Outcomes**

Maintaining and establishing stands of native grass will not only increase the amount of wildlife habitat available for curlews, but also provide suitable nesting habitat for other species of grassland birds as well. By implementing Prescribed Grazing, fields which can be grazed below the ideal conditions for Long-billed Curlews - either by the time the birds arrive in early Spring (mid-April) or during the nesting and brood rearing period (May-June) - will be deferred to a later date for grazing. This delay of grazing will allow proper conditions, namely proper grass height of 10-30 cm for nesting and 30-40 cm for brood rearing, to be present in several pastures throughout a property. In addition to wildlife habitat, increasing grassland/rangeland acreage provides forage for livestock and can help to alleviate soil erosion, improve water quality through filtration, and increase water holding capacity.

Conservation-based grazing strategies in this TIP will provide the grassland structure and composition desired and serves as a tool through which to manage these grasslands to avoid monoculture stands or plant pests. Prescribed grazing would enhance plant productivity, health, and composition for existing and newly established grasslands.

Each prescribed grazing plan will contain monitoring strategies specific to key sites and habitat objectives. In most cases, permanent line-point transects and photo points will be established to monitor ground and vegetation cover. Rangeland health assessments and range trend determinations will be assessed before and after completion of the contract. Our expectation is that these will show improvements in rangeland health and positive rangeland trend.

## Ranking Questions

1. During the Long-billed Curlew nesting season (May 1 – June 15), is the producer willing to avoid grazing on (Pick only one):
    - 1) One pasture?
    - 2) Two pastures?
    - 3) Three or more pastures?
    - 4) No pastures?
  2. Will the practices in this application improve grazing distribution?  
Yes  
No
  3. Will the practices in this application address inadequate stock water?  
Yes  
No
  4. Will activities create or enhance a habitat block\* of (Pick only one):
    - 1) 160 to 319 acres?
    - 2) 320 to 639 acres?
    - 3) 640 acres or more?
    - 4) Less than 160 acres?
- \* A habitat block is defined here as grassland uninterrupted (regardless of ownership) by non-habitat (cropland with the exceptions of hay land, buildings, or paved and gravel roads).
5. Does the application include (Pick all that apply):
    - 1) Planting annual cropland back to native rangeland?
    - 2) Planting annual cropland to a diverse mix of introduced forage?
    - 3) Renovating degraded pastureland to a diverse stand of native or introduced forage?
    - 4) None of the above?

## Appendix

### References:

Casey, D. (2013). *Conservation Strategies for the Long-billed Curlew: Focal Areas, Desired Habitat Conditions and Best Management Practices*. American Bird Conservancy. [https://mtaudubon.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ConservationStrategiesLong-billedCurlew\\_Casey2013.pdf](https://mtaudubon.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ConservationStrategiesLong-billedCurlew_Casey2013.pdf)

Clarke, J. N. (2006). Reproductive ecology of Long-billed Curlews breeding in grazed landscapes of western South Dakota (Master's thesis, Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences Department, South Dakota State University).

Gage, A. M., Olimb, S. K., & Nelson, J. (2016). Plowprint: tracking cumulative cropland expansion to target grassland conservation. *Great Plains Research*, 26(2), 107-116.

Lipsey, M. K., Doherty, K. E., Naugle, D. E., Fields, S., Evans, J. S., Davis, S. K., & Koper, N. (2015). One step ahead of the plow: Using cropland conversion risk to guide Sprague's Pipit conservation in the northern Great Plains. *Biological Conservation*, 191, 739-749.

Northern Great Plains Joint Venture (2019). Conservation Guidance Document.

Rosenberg, K. V., Dokter, A. M., Blancher, P. J., Sauer, J. R., Smith, A. C., Smith, P. A., ... & Marra, P. P. (2019). Decline of the North American avifauna. *Science*, 366(6461), 120-124.

*Land Manager's Guide to*

# **Grassland Conservation and the Long-billed Curlew**



<https://abcbirds.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Land-Managers-Guide-to-Long-billed-Curlew-Conservation.pdf>



World Wildlife Fund  
Northern Great Plains Program  
P.O. Box 7276  
Bozeman, MT 59711  
Phone: 406-582-0236  
worldwildlife.org

Natural Resources Conservation Service

January 26, 2023

RE: Support for the TIP proposal - *The Long-billed Curlew as a Focal Species for Improving Livestock Forage on Rangelands with High Grassland Bird Density.*

I am writing in full support of the proposal to this proposal focusing on the Long-billed Curlew, specifically to improve terrestrial wildlife habitat with the added benefits of improving habitat for a suite of grassland bird species and other wildlife, as well as building range and ranch resiliency. Because curlews require habitats of short to mid and taller (6") grass, their habitat needs overlap those of many grassland bird species which are of conservation concern due to their population declines the past 50 years. These habitat needs fit well with rotational grazing plans, particularly those including relatively longer periods of rest than typically implemented by most producers. This rest can build ranch resiliency by building a reserve of forage in periods of drought and by helping to build soil health to better retain precious moisture when more episodic rain and snow melt events occur.

The proposed work is highly complementary of our work in Custer and Powder River counties - and throughout central and eastern Montana. WWF supports many local collaboratives, and administers grassland restoration and ranch support program<sup>5</sup> Our Ranch Systems and Viability Planning program (RSVP) is complementary to many NRCS TIPs across the state, and could serve agricultural producers in Custer and Powder River counties alongside the TIP proposed here. WWF supports ABC capacity in Eastern Montana and could provide ecological monitoring and financial assistance through RSVP to NRCS and ABC-led projects where those additional resources would be value-added. We work to help build rangeland resiliency through our program to help producers with grazing management plans, ranch infrastructure such as new fence and water tank<sup>5</sup>, re-seeding marginal cropland, and by providing ecological monitoring and interpreting. With the proposed project's grazing planning and seeding practices, we see many opportunities for our work to overlap with the services being offered by this TIP.

Thank you,

DocuSigned by:  
  
ALEXIS BONOGOFSKY

Alexis Bonogofsky  
Manager - Sustainable Ranching Initiative

Northern Great Plains Joint Venture  
128 Forest Park Drive, Clancy, MT 59634 406-599-7384



January 27, 2023

Montana Natural Resources Conservation Service

Bozeman, Montana

RE: Support for the TIP proposal - *The Long-billed curlew as a Focal Species for Improving Livestock Forage on Rangelands with High Grassland Bird Density.*

**To Whom It May Concern,**

I am writing on behalf of the Northern Great Plains Joint Venture (NGPJV) in support of this proposal to use the Long-billed Curlew as a focal species for improving terrestrial habitat with the added benefits of improving habitat for a suite of grassland bird species and other wildlife, as well as building range and ranch resiliency. Because curlews require habitats of short and mid to taller (6") grass, their habitat needs overlap those of many grassland bird species which are of conservation concern due to their population declines of the past 50 years. These habitat needs fit well with rotational grazing plans, particularly those including relatively longer periods of rest than typically implemented by most producers. This rest can build ranch resiliency by building a reserve of forage in periods of drought and by helping to build soil health to better retain precious moisture when more episodic rain and snow melt events occur.

The proposed work compliments NGPJV work in the Northern Great Plains. We work to help build rangeland resiliency through our Northern Grassland Restoration Incentive Program (N-GRIP) to help producers with grazing management plans, ranch infrastructure such as new fence and water tanks, and the seeding of marginally productive cropland to grassland with primarily native plants to improve soil health and forage for livestock. With the proposed project's grazing planning and seeding practices, we see opportunities for the proposal to increase participation in N-GRIP seeding projects to leverage this project, if funded.

The NGPJV recommends support for this proposal to help restore and enhance important habitats in the Northern Great Plains region.

Sincerely,

Catherine Wightman  
Coordinator



Montana Natural Resources Conservation Service

January 26, 2023

RE: Support for the TIP proposal - *The Long-billed Curlew as a Focal Species for Improving Livestock Forage on Rangelands with High Grassland Bird Density.*

Please accept this letter in full support for this proposal to use the Long-billed Curlew as a focal species for improving terrestrial wildlife habitat with the added benefits of improving habitat for a suite of grassland bird species and other wildlife, as well as building range and ranch resiliency. Because curlews require habitats of short to mid and taller (6") grass, their habitat needs overlap those of many grassland bird species which are of conservation concern due to their population declines the past 50 years. These habitat needs fit well with rotational grazing plans, particularly those including relatively longer periods of rest than typically implemented by most producers. This rest can build ranch resiliency and economic stability by building a reserve of forage in periods of drought and by helping to build soil health to better retain precious moisture when more episodic rain and snowmelt events occur.

The proposed work is highly complementary of similar efforts by American Bird Conservancy (ABC) in Custer and Powder River counties and the region. They work to help build rangeland resiliency with producers on grazing management plans, ranch infrastructure such as new fence and water tanks, and the seeding of marginally productive cropland to grassland with primarily Native plants to improve soil health and forage for livestock.

We at, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, employ several partner biologists in the Northern Great Plains, including one in eastern Montana, this effort great aligns with our goals. Further this effort would amplify our partnership with ABC and NRCS by promoting more targeted management practices in Montana. With the proposed project's grazing plan and seeding practices, we see opportunities for the proposal to increase participation in other seeding projects to leverage this project, if funded. Please give this proposal your highest consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Angela Dwyer".

Angela Dwyer  
Program Manager, Northern Great Plains  
[angela.dwyer@birdconservancy.org](mailto:angela.dwyer@birdconservancy.org)

BRIGHTON HEADQUARTERS  
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[www.birdconservancy.org](http://www.birdconservancy.org)



Montana Natural Resources Conservation Service

January 31, 2023

RE: Support for the TIP proposal - *The Long-billed Curlew as a Focal Species for Improving Livestock Forage and Rangelands with High Grassland Bird Density.*

I am writing in full support of the proposal to use the Long-billed Curlew as a focal species for improving terrestrial wildlife habitat with the added benefits of improving habitat for a suite of grassland bird species and other wildlife, as well as building range and ranch resiliency. Because curlews require habitats of short to mid and taller (6") grass, their habitat needs overlap those of many grassland and upland bird species which are of conservation concern due to their population declines the past 50 years. Intact and healthy grasslands are vital to the Montana way of life and the wildlife that calls them home. This proposal will ensure that healthy grasslands and sustainable grazing systems are in place, benefiting wildlife and grazing operations.

The proposed Targeted Implementation plan is Focused, Partner Centric, Cost Effective, Locally Led, and Results Oriented. These qualities make success a high likelihood and fits within the requirements of Montana Focused Conservation guidelines. Additionally, this effort is complementary of our work in Custer and Powder River counties and the region. Currently through the efforts of our Farm Bill Biologists and State Coordinator we work to help build rangeland resiliency through our programs to help producers with grazing management plans, ranch infrastructure such as new fence and water tanks, and the seeding of marginally productive cropland to grassland with primarily native plants to improve soil health and forage for livestock. With the proposed project's grazing planning and seeding practices, we see opportunities for the proposal to increase participation in our seeding projects to leverage this project, if funded.

Sincerely,

Hunter VanDonsel  
MT /WY State Coordinator  
406-461-3827



## **POWDER RIVER** Conservation District

PO Box 180 | Broadus, MT 59317 | (406) 438-2321 x111

Nate Reid  
American Bird Conservancy  
February 15, 2023

Nate,

The Powder River Conservation District would like to show its support for the TIP proposal focusing on the improvement of wildlife habitat for the Long-billed Curlew and other grassland bird species and wildlife. Through this effort, range, and ranch resiliency will also be enhanced.

Long-billed Curlews utilize a variety of forage habitats during their life cycle. As such, these various grassland heights overlap the habitats of many other declining grassland bird species. Providing a mixture of forage environments can be accomplished through proper rotational grazing programs which will in turn develop range quality and resiliency, aiding ranchers in improving soil health and providing food with forage reserves during periods of drought.

Preservation of our native rangeland and grassland bird species is imperative for future generations to enjoy their majesty. It would also increase public awareness and knowledge of the Long-billed Curlew and other threatened grassland bird populations, while raising concern for migratory bird conservation.

Thanks so much for presenting your TIP to the district.

Powder River ,Conservation District  
Ben VerWolf, Chair  
Floyd Huckins, Vice Chair  
Gene Smith  
Jim Bowers  
Bill Stevens  
Gloria Rosencranz  
Garrett Harrington  
Liz Riter, Administrator  
Jessica Beagles, Deputy Administrator

## *Custer County Conservation District*

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3120 Valley Drive East  
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Phone: 406-232-7905 ext. 3242  
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Montana Natural Resources Conservation Service

February 23, 2023

RE: Support for the TIP proposal: The Long-billed Curlew as a Focal Species for Improving Livestock Forage on Rangelands with High Grassland Bird Density

Please accept this letter in support from the Custer County Conservation District (CCCD) for this proposal to use the Long-billed Curlew as a focal species for improving terrestrial wildlife habitat with the added benefits of improving habitat for a suite of grassland bird species and other wildlife, as well as building range and ranch resiliency. Because curlews require habitats of short to mid and taller (6") grass, their habitat needs overlap those of many grassland bird species which are of conservation concern due to their population declines the past 50 years. These habitat needs fit well with rotational grazing plans, particularly those including relatively longer periods of rest than typically implemented by most producers. This rest can build ranch resiliency and economic stability by building a reserve of forage in periods of drought and by helping to build soil health to better retain precious moisture when more episodic rain and snow melt events occur.

Preservation of native rangeland and grassland bird species is vital for future generations to not only enjoy the species but what they provide to our ecosystem. The CCCD recommends support for this proposal to help restore important habitats in the region.

Sincerely,

Custer County Conservation District  
Charley Bumgardner, Chairman