



SDALT Receives NFWF Grant to Conserve Native Grasslands

The South Dakota Ag Land Trust (SDALT) has been awarded a \$400,000 matching grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) to help protect vital grassland habitat across the Great Plains while also strengthening ranching operations and communities.

The grant will be leveraged with matching funds to secure more than \$13 million for conservation easements to protect native grasslands that provide habitat for grassland-obligate wildlife populations, while promoting the sustainability of working agricultural lands, the landowners who steward them, and the natural resources they provide.

SDALT's award is part of a package totaling nearly \$18.5 million in grants from NFWF. The 26 grants in the

package will leverage \$50.3 million in matching contributions to generate a total conservation impact of \$68.8 million.

The grants will improve habitat for a wide range of species, including grassland birds, pronghorn, greater sage grouse and black-footed ferrets, while strengthening the long-term sustainability of working ranchlands and tribal communities.

"Advancing conservation across the Great Plains requires collaboration at a scale that matches the landscape itself," said Jeff Trandahl, executive director and CEO of NFWF. "Through these grants, NFWF and its partners are conserving and restoring critical grasslands while supporting the ranching communities and local economies that depend on them. Thanks to the support of our funding partners in the public and private sectors, these projects will deliver meaningful conservation outcomes that benefit wildlife, working lands and the people who steward them."

More than half of the Great Plains' historic footprint of native grasslands has been lost to land-use conversion, woody encroachment, the spread of invasive species, and fragmentation. Projects supported by these grants seek to address these conservation challenges while also restoring grasslands that have been lost, improving grazing practices by volunteer ranching operations, and increasing regional capacity to implement wildlife conservation practices.

Our Mission



SDALT is an organization founded by South Dakota farmers and ranchers for South Dakota farmers and ranchers.

We work with landowners to conserve South Dakota's agricultural heritage and working landscapes for the benefit of future generations.

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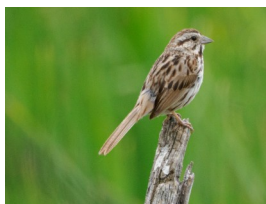
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Shared Goals

By Tony Leif, SDALT Executive Director



For generations, farmers and ranchers have understood that the health of the land determines the future of the people who depend on it. Long before conservation became a public policy discussion, stewardship was already a way of life across rural South Dakota.

While public discussions about natural resources sometimes become political, stewardship on the land is rarely about politics. It is about practical decisions that protect soil, conserve water, improve grazing lands, enhance wildlife habitat, and ensure that farms and ranches remain productive for years to come.

Agricultural producers know that productive soils, clean water, and healthy grasslands are not just environmental assets – they are the foundation of successful operations and strong communities. Caring for these resources is essential to maintaining both economic viability and the agricultural heritage that is passed from one generation to the next.

There was a time when conservation and agriculture were sometimes portrayed as competing interests. That time has passed. Today most everyone realizes that sound agricultural and conservation practices go hand in hand. Rotational grazing, cover crops, no-till farming, riparian buffers, and habitat restoration help improve soil health, reduce erosion, conserve water, and support wildlife while maintaining productive working lands.

Sustainable agricultural stewardship practices transcend politics regardless of the labels placed on them by various political ideologies. Farmers and ranchers do not manage their land according to political affiliations. They make decisions based on what will sustain their operations, strengthen their communities, and preserve resources for future generations. Conservation succeeds when it focuses on practical solutions, voluntary partnerships, and local knowledge and control.

Across South Dakota, landowners are leading the way through innovative stewardship practices that benefit both agriculture and natural resources. Their efforts help protect water quality, support wildlife habitat, improve drought resilience, and ensure that working lands remain productive for years to come.

The most effective conservation solutions emerge through partnerships. Landowners, conservation organizations, local districts, agencies, and communities each bring valuable perspectives and expertise. By focusing on shared goals rather than political differences, these partnerships create lasting benefits for both people and the landscape.

As a conservation organization, we recognize that lasting conservation is only possible when landowners are partners in the process. By working together – producers, conservation professionals, community leaders, and recreationalists – we can preserve a future where agriculture remains strong and natural resources remain healthy.

Stewardship is more than a management practice. It is a commitment to the land, to our communities, and to the generations that will follow. It is a value shared across fence lines, across communities, and across political differences. In that sense, conservation is not a partisan issue – it is a shared responsibility and a common purpose.

Thank you for supporting our efforts that strengthen both agriculture and conservation. Together, we are helping ensure that our working lands continue to provide food, fiber, wildlife habitat, and preserve opportunities for generations to come.

Working Cows Podcast: How Conservation Easements Can Help With Succession and Protect Landscapes

There are many challenges with passing the ranch on to the next generation.

It is difficult financially because many times people need to live on the equity they have built. It is also difficult financially because of the pressure that development puts on ranches to make room for urban expansion.

South Dakota Ag Land Trust board member Karl Jensen and Conservation Easement Project Manager Bill Eastman joined podcast host Clay Conry to discuss how conservation easements can help address these challenges, as well as the logistics and considerations of putting land into a conservation easement.

Eastman and Jensen explained the history of SDALT, as well as the “why” and “how” of conservation easements. Both stressed that the goal of SDALT is the long-term preservation of ag land, and the long-term ability of farmers and ranchers to feed the world.

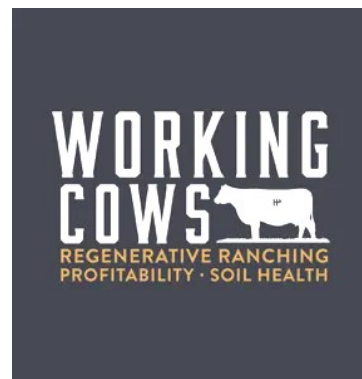
Jensen explained that four South Dakota agricultural organizations came together more than five years ago to form SDALT, making it an organization by farmers and ranchers for farmers and ranchers. He observed, “My Dad used to say that whenever there’s an issue facing agriculture in South Dakota, the tendency of all the organizations is to circle the wagons and fire inward. But this is a case where a variety of ag organizations have come together. We have a joint purpose.”

Eastman noted that SDALT is focused on finding ways to help landowners meet their goals. “The land is the legacy,” he said. “It’s such an honor to talk to people that have such passion about their land. It’s why I love doing what I’m doing.”

Whenever a landowner approaches SDALT about a potential conservation easement, the landowner is in control of the conversation. If an easement with SDALT isn’t appropriate, the landowner will be directed toward other conservation opportunities.

Landowners who have questions about SDALT or conservation easements are encouraged to talk with any of the four founding organizations — Farm Bureau, Grassland Coalition, Cattlemen’s Association, and Association of Conservation Districts—to get more information about SDALT.

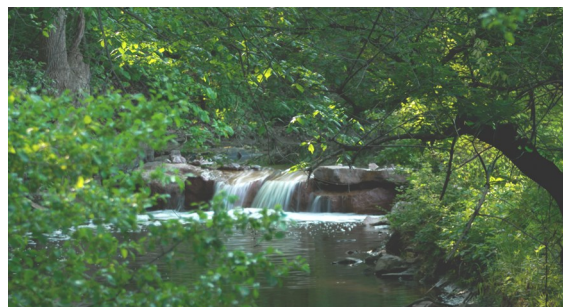
The podcast is available to listen to online at <https://workingcows.net/511>



What are SDALT’s Guiding Principles?

SDALT will

- ... pursue voluntary conservation strategies that promote the long-term protection of agricultural land, while supporting private land ownership
- ... respect the right of landowners to make day-to-day management decisions
- ... recognize the role of sustainable land uses as a means of maintaining open and productive landscapes
- ... avoid fee-title ownership as a means of conservation



SDALT Founding Organizations:

- SD Grassland Coalition*
- SD Cattlemen’s Association*
- SD Farm Bureau Federation*
- SD Association of Conservation Districts*

McKernan Receives National Recognition

SDALT Vice President Mike McKernan received national recognition this spring from the National Wild Turkey Federation as one of the recipients of the Roger M. Latham Sportsman Wild Turkey Service Awards for his extraordinary dedication to the organization's mission. McKernan received the award during the NWTF's 50th annual convention and sport show.

"I was surprised," McKernan said about winning the award. "I've been with NWTF for over 20 years now, and I started my own chapter after getting bit by the turkey bug. A big thanks to the NWTF for getting me involved and giving me experiences I wouldn't have otherwise had. I don't know if I've ever been as passionate about anything else."

McKernan caught that bug in 1999 when a friend invited him to go on a memorial turkey hunt. He had never been turkey hunting but was willing to try, so in mid-April in western South Dakota, the gentlemen went out to turkey camp. Despite freezing rain and early mornings, McKernan was hooked.

"It was something about being out in the morning, hearing them gobbling," McKernan recalled. "When I got home from that hunt, I spent \$500 on gear, and the next year I drew a tag, learned how to hunt. It was a blast calling, being outside seeing everything. There was also frustration and challenge, but I had never had so much fun."

McKernan has now been a NWTF member for over 26 years. He belongs



Mike McKernan, center, at the NWTF awards ceremony

to the Whetstone Gobblers Chapter, serving as chapter president and banquet chairman, as well as overseeing the chapter's financials. He was elected to the NWTF South Dakota State Board where he has served as president, vice president, and director.

While he was on the state board, he was deeply involved in rewriting the NWTF South Dakota State Constitution. McKernan has also served on the NWTF National Board of Directors. He remains one of the state chapter's leaders in organizing, hosting and volunteering at R3 events.

In 2013, the NWTF South Dakota State Board inducted McKernan into the state hall of fame.

McKernan volunteers as an NWTF instructor at the Wildlife Federation Youth Camp in the Black Hills, where he helps educate the young attendees on the wild turkey and turkey ecology.

He plays a major role in planning the South Dakota NWTF State Wheelin' Sportsmen pheasant hunt, volunteering at the event as an EMS worker and a walker who busts up birds for participating hunters to shoot. He also cleans harvested birds and helps the caterer with feeding everyone.

"Mike lives the NWTF mission," NWTF co-CEO Jason Burckhalter said. "We were lucky to have him serve on our National Board, and we are grateful to have his dedication to the mission through his efforts in introducing the next generation to conservation and turkey hunting. He is a linchpin for the NWTF, and we are proud to commend his efforts with a Roger M. Latham Sportsman Wild Turkey Service Award."

McKernan represents the Grassland Coalition on the SDALT Board.

Since 1973, the NWTF has invested over half a billion dollars into wildlife conservation and has positively impacted over 25 million acres of critical wildlife habitat. Since 2022, the NWTF has also invested over \$2.3 million in critical wild turkey research that, when leveraged with partner contributions, has resulted in more than \$22 million to guide the management of the wild turkey and to ensure sustainable populations. The organization continues to deliver its mission by working across boundaries on a landscape scale to deliver healthy forests and wildlife habitats, clean and abundant water, resilient communities and robust recreational opportunities. With the help of its dedicated members, partners and staff, the NWTF is committed to creating a nation united by the life-changing power of the outdoors.



**Yes, I would like to support the
South Dakota Ag Land Trust!**

Your contribution makes it possible for SDALT to work with landowners to preserve working landscapes, protect water quality, and provide wildlife habitat throughout South Dakota.

Donations may be made online at sdaglandtrust.org. You can also download and complete our contribution form and mail it to the SDALT office.

SDALT is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.