

# Just Transitions to Managed Livestock Grazing in the Midwestern U.S.: Summary of Recommendations on CSP and EQIP

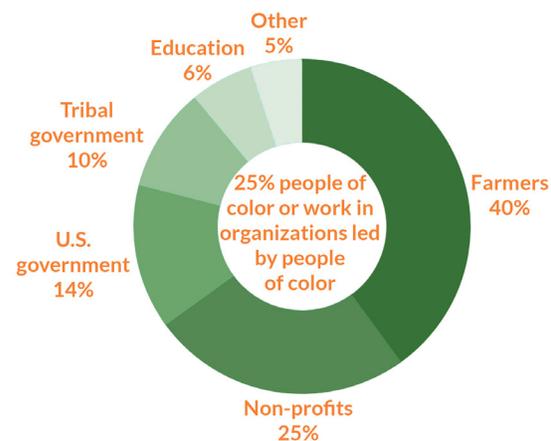
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This brief synthesizes recommendations from 128 members of the Midwest grazing and agricultural community on how the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Conservation Stewardship Program can be tailored to support managed livestock grazing and build a more equitable food system.”<sup>1</sup>

Managed grazing refers to the practice of rotating animals through pastures, allowing each pasture to rest after grazing. The movement gives forages time to regrow, contributing to pasture productivity, soil health, reduced nutrient loss and improved water quality, and increased biodiversity. In addition to being ecologically important, managed grazing can provide economic and lifestyle benefits to farmers and rural communities. Livestock grazing is also a culturally and ecologically important practice in the Midwest region, including for many Native communities who are actively recovering the practice of grazing bison.

The purpose of this document is to share community member experiences. Our intent is not to analyze these recommendations or propose exactly how to achieve them, but to amplify the voices of the community members we interviewed. A full report, which includes more detail on the background of this project and these recommendations can be found here: [grasslandag.org/justtransitions](https://grasslandag.org/justtransitions). The order of recommendations in this document follows the order of the report and is not ranked based on priority.

We interviewed 128 community members across the Upper Midwest in 2020 and 2021, primarily in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Iowa, and Michigan. We asked them about their vision for the future, and what is needed to support managed livestock grazing.



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<sup>1</sup> All participants quoted are listed with their position at the time of their interview

## Needs at a glance:

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program
  - Streamline and expedite the application process
  - Eliminate the need for upfront capital to participate
  - Reduce infrastructure requirements for fencing
  - Change requirements to support farmers beginning or transitioning to raising livestock
  - Provide more equitable support for perennial agriculture
  - Allow EQIP funds to be used for pasture-raising non-ruminant animals
- Greater support for grazing in the Conservation Stewardship Program

### Environmental Quality Incentives Program

#### *Streamline and expedite the application process*

Many interviewees emphasized that long application wait times were inhibitive. Kirsten Jurcek, a beef grazier and grazing plan writer in Wisconsin, shared that in her experience, for farmers who try to use EQIP “*it can be three years before your property’s ready to have livestock,*” a length of time that many are unable or unwilling to wait.

#### *Eliminate the need for upfront capital to participate*

Some interviewees shared that fronting the cost of infrastructure investments, particularly on top of other costs for participating in EQIP (e.g., grazing plans), is challenging for farmers with limited capital. While EQIP offers advance payments of up to 50% for “underserved producers,” fronting 50% of the cost still represents a substantial barrier.

#### *Reduce infrastructure requirements for fencing*

A few farmers shared that the fencing requirements for EQIP are more robust (and thus more costly) than they need to be. Scott Mericka, dairy grazier and owner of Uplands Cheese in Wisconsin shared that

*“[In EQIP they] over-build everything and it costs so much damn money... a good friend of mine, he’s like, ‘yeah, in two years I’m going to go through and take out half this fence’ [because it was so over-engineered]. It costs the taxpayers more money [because they] built it so you could hold in a herd of buffalo.”*

Moreover, it increases program participation costs for farmers, which can be particularly inhibitive given the requirements to front capital.

#### *Change program requirements to support farmers beginning or transitioning to raising livestock*

Interviewees voiced frustration with the fact that the EQIP program primarily supports existing graziers rather than beginning farmers who wish to start grazing or existing farmers who want to diversify their farm by adding livestock or transition to grazing from crop production. Grazing cover crops can provide row crop farmers the opportunity to add an enterprise to their farm or to try their hand at grazing before fully transitioning their operation. However, interviewees shared that they’d been told it’s not possible to receive EQIP funding for both cover crops and fencing, making it difficult to fund farm diversification or transition. Moreover, they shared

*“We are still considered non-livestock people [by NRCS]. They won’t help build an exterior fence for you to confine them [and] you’ve got to be running cattle before they’re willing to offer any help as far as watering or anything like that.”*

Row crop grazier, IL

that farmers have to have animals before receiving support for the infrastructure (like water and exterior fencing) necessary to own them, doing little to offset significant startup costs.

### ***Provide more equitable support for perennial agriculture***

A number of interviewees shared that EQIP is structured to support confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs) and row crop farmers more than farmers utilizing managed grazing or other more holistic sustainable farming practices. Many people supported structuring EQIP more like CSP – to pay farmers for their performance rather than rewarding them for reducing harmful practices. Restructuring EQIP so that it does more to pay for performance would help even the playing field for beginning farmers who wish to start a sustainable farm and for existing farmers who have been farming sustainably for many years.

Interviewees also voiced that the application process for EQIP funding is more complicated, costly, and time-intensive for some types of perennial agriculture. Wendy Johnson, an Iowa farmer who grazes beef cattle as well as farming row crops, talked about the challenge of acquiring EQIP funding for silvopasture:

*“We’ve had trouble navigating the NRCS cost-share programs for [silvopasture]... You need a grazing plan, you need an Organic transition plan, you need a silvopasture plan, and then you have to pay for these plans. You’re like two years behind and the deadlines are all over the place. It’s not fair that [NRCS is] so in tune with [practices for annual crops] but it’s like fighting tooth and nail when you want to try [perennials].”*

### ***Allow EQIP funds to be used for pasture-raising non-ruminant animals***

Farmers pasture-raising pigs and poultry were frustrated that they couldn’t use EQIP funding to raise their animals on pasture. While non-ruminant animals can’t graze, they still provide many ecological benefits. Integrating poultry into silvopasture operations or diversifying ruminant rotations with non-ruminant animals can be beneficial for soil health as well as pest, pathogen, and disease suppression. Farmers who pasture pigs and/or poultry as part of a livestock rotation with ruminant animals expressed frustration over EQIP contracts that forced them to adjust their rotations to avoid rotating chickens or pigs through equip-funded pastures.

*“Pigs are the best soil builder I have. I actually take some of my bison pastures or horse pastures and put pigs in it in the fall, and wherever the pigs were, that’s where [the other] animals stay all spring, because the grass is that much richer. You can actually see the color difference from where they were and where they weren’t.”*

**Dave Cronauer**

White Bison Farm and farm manager at Bodwéwadmi Ktëgan, Forest County Potawatomi Nation, WI

### **Conservation Stewardship Program**

Interviewees generally expressed positive feedback about the CSP program. They particularly appreciated that it is a “pay for performance” program, that rewards farmers for farming sustainably, rather than incentivizing farmers to move away from harmful practices. However, some interviewees asserted that CSP disproportionately benefits conventional or row crop farmers relative to farmers utilizing managed grazing or other more comprehensive approaches to sustainable farming. Laura Paine, a Wisconsin grazer, explained that part of the problem is that “CSP is set up to give more options to crop farmers to layer on additional payments.” She explained that many of these payments were irrelevant for farms grazing animals or other types of farms that take a more agroecological, whole-farm approach to sustainability. She continued, “IPM is a practice you can get paid for through CSP. I don’t need it on my farm, so I don’t have access to that incentive payment. You get paid more per acre by having more things stacked up than [for] having a comprehensive grazing program.”