

# Just Transitions to Managed Livestock Grazing in the Midwestern U.S.: Summary of NRCS Technical Support Recommendations

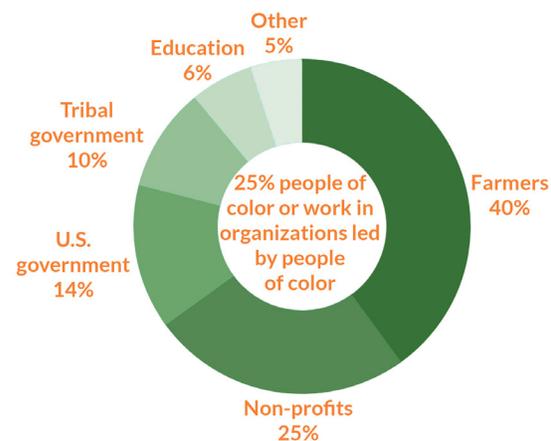
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This brief synthesizes recommendations from 128 members of the Midwest grazing and agricultural community on how NRCS can improve technical support for managed livestock grazing in ways that also better support populations defined by NRCS as “socially disadvantaged.”<sup>1,2</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.



This project was produced with support from *Grassland 2.0*, a collaborative group of producers, researchers, and public and private sector leaders working to create pathways for producers to achieve increased profitability and production stability, while improving water quality, soil health, biodiversity, and climate resiliency. *Grassland 2.0* is funded by the United States Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture, Sustainable Agriculture Systems Coordinated Agricultural Program grant no. 2019-68012-29852.



1 All participants quoted are listed with their position at the time of their interview  
2 <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/getting-assistance/underserved-farmers-ranchers>

## Needs at a glance:

- Increase support for grazing, especially for animals other than cattle
- Continue to improve technical support for “socially disadvantaged farmers”
- Engage communities of color in program development and tailor programs to their needs
- Collaborate with the Department of Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)

### Increase support for grazing, especially for animals other than cattle

Many interviewees valued NRCS technical support and funding. However, they also emphasized the need to train more people to write grazing plans and to provide consistent support for grazing across NRCS offices, particularly in states dominated by corn and soy industries. This is particularly important as a grazing plan is a necessity for accessing NRCS programs.

Interviewees had seen a growing interest among their connections in pasturing sheep, goats, chickens, pigs, and bison. Smaller animals are a more viable entry point for farmers with limited capital and they have a smaller environmental impact than cattle. Some of these animals also provide healthier meat or culturally important foods to communities of color. However, interviewees shared how a lack of programming tailored to smaller animals and limited expertise outside of cattle creates barriers to NRCS program and funding access for many producers. Interviewees grazing animals other than cattle were frustrated with the limited technical support available to them. Some shared stories of struggling to apply NRCS program requirements to their farms because they were written for cattle. Many had a difficult time finding TSPs with the expertise to write a grazing plan, and one farmer shared that a TSP required them to purchase pasture plants that had documented negative endocrine effects on sheep. Moreover, NRCS funds cannot be used to support pasture-raising non-ruminant animals like poultry or hogs, despite the benefits of raising these animals in pasture systems. While non-ruminant animals can't graze, they still benefit from a life outdoors, and 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.

*“My first trick was to figure out who I could get to have a grazing plan written... in Illinois at the time when I applied... there was only one [person and] as far as I know, he’s not doing any more work... I’d have to go to Indiana... you’d have more people get into grazing if there was people that you can rely on to get that job done.”*

**Evan Schuette**  
Beef grazer, IL

### Improve technical support for “socially disadvantaged farmers” (See Education & Capital)

*“What I found with Immigrant farmers is they didn’t know [USDA] existed, they were undocumented and afraid to work with anyone from the government, they tried but nobody spoke Spanish, [they were mistaken for a] farm worker... Institutional resources were not available to them as they would be to a U.S.-born white farmer” –Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern, Professor of Food Studies, Syracuse University*

USDA has a history of discrimination against communities of color, and there is a need to build trust and repair this damage in order to work effectively with these groups. As a result, NRCS, Extension, and other

technical support providers have few relationships with farmers of color, and the 5% of NRCS funds allocated for “underserved producers,” often go undistributed. Chris Borden, an NRCS Tribal Liaison in Wisconsin, talked about how NRCS has worked with “*generations of dairy farmers in Wisconsin. When you go into the field offices, you’ll see great grandpa’s casefile... and we just worked with the great, great grandson,*” while for many farmers of color, those types of relationships don’t exist.

Immigrant farmers emphasized the importance of having TSPs who speak their language, and some shared that lack of clear guidance has made them hesitant to use government programs, sell certain products, or apply for loans. A diversified grazer who immigrated from Laos to Iowa explained that he would like to access government programs “*but the problem is English... if somebody helped to direct me to get in a program... I’d go for it, but I just don’t know how.*” And, a diversified grazer in Minnesota shared, “*In Mexico, I used to make cheese. I wanted to make cheese. We bought a goat [but] I did not try to sell [the cheese] because I was afraid that [regulators] were going to say that it wasn’t done right.*”

To build trust with communities of color and improve technical support, interviewees provided the following recommendations:

- Address racism and implicit bias amongst technical support providers
- Hire multiple people from communities of color and who speak languages other than English
- Build relationships with trusted organizations in communities of color and distribute resources through those groups (e.g. community centers, mutual aid associations, Tribal newspapers)
- When working with non-native English speakers: allow people to verbalize rather than write; use pictures and video; reduce jargon and define terms like “organic” that are not used in some languages

When working with Native communities:

- Learn about Indigenous agriculture and Tribal government, land, and legal structures
- Understand Tribal priorities and how this affects program participation
- Support Tribal Conservation Advisory Councils, like the [Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council](#) (WTCAC), and work with them to interface with Tribes
- Hire more Tribal Liaisons or others who can work with TCACs to support Native producers
- Increase funding and support for pathways programs that place students from Tribal Colleges and Universities into careers at NRCS and other agencies

***“We’ve found that Federal [and] state governments do not understand Tribal agriculture... It’s a concern for us because their version of impact may be different than what ours is. Ours is just as legitimate, [but] if they don’t fully understand... we don’t score high [on grant applications].”***

**Gary Besaw**

Director, Menominee Department of Agriculture & Food Systems

## **Engage communities of color in program development and tailor programs to their needs**

Colby Duren, former Director of Policy and Government Relations at the Intertribal Agriculture Council shared that most federal programs are designed without Tribal leaders or producers. Instead, Tribes are consulted after the fact. For this reason, many Tribal producers end up thinking “*programs aren’t made for me or my production.*” A more effective approach would be to invite Tribes to the table from the beginning when designing new policies or programs. Interviewees also emphasized the importance of

building flexibility into government programs and giving farmers or communities more agency to dictate how funding is used. In the context of working with Native communities, Colby Duren also emphasized that *“every Tribe has its unique history and relationship with the federal government [and] its own ideas and vision.”* Building more flexibility into programs would allow individual Tribes to tailor programs to their needs. Similarly, Yimmuj Yang, Community Director for the non-profit Groundswell Conservancy in Wisconsin shared that many people are advocating for *“bottom-up funding opportunities where the community organization or the people that are the most in need are dictating how that funding gets used so that it is culturally appropriate.”*

## **Collaborate with the Department of Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)**

Some interviewees mentioned that government agencies like the USDA have not engaged in Tribal agriculture due to conflicts in responsibility with the BIA and incompatibility with BIA regulations over Tribal land. For example, an employee of the Intertribal Agriculture Council (IAC) explained:

*“Before the 2014 Farm Bill, under the regulations of Interior, you couldn’t do an easement for more than 25 years on Tribal lands. However, at NRCS you were required to get a 30-year easement... Because [those numbers] didn’t match up, some people wouldn’t get those NRCS contracts.”*

Collaboration between the NRCS and the BIA is critical for the NRCS to work effectively with Tribes. As the IAC employee continued,

*“The Department of Interior has the land trustee component. USDA has agricultural expertise and programs. Where those intersect [there is] support for Tribal food production [and] land conservation. When a BIA representative and a NRCS representative talk to each other the conversation makes it happen.”*