

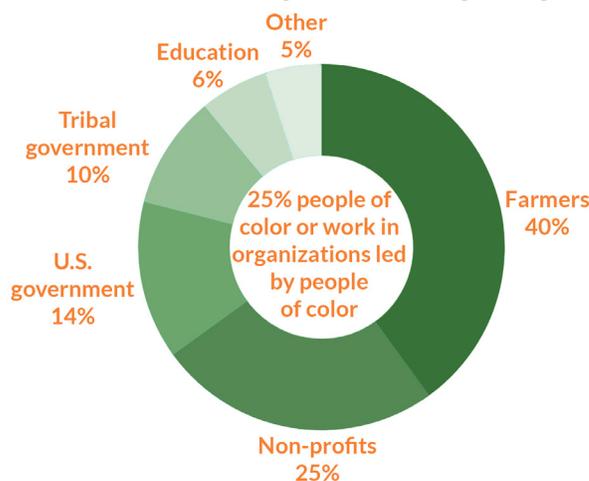
Just Transitions to Managed Livestock Grazing in the Midwestern U.S.: Summary of Recommendations for Universities

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This brief provides an overview of recommendations from 128 Midwest grazing and agricultural community members on how universities can support managed livestock grazing and build a more equitable food system.¹

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, 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.

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.



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. The order of recommendations in this document follows the order of the report and is not ranked based on priority.

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¹ All participants quoted are listed with their position at the time of their interview.

Needs at a glance:

- Expand research and education on grazing, especially for animals other than cattle
- Expand research and education programs on sustainable agriculture
- Expand research and teaching on agricultural issues beyond specific farming practices
- Learn about Tribal agriculture, governance, and legal structures
- Leverage the privilege of a degree to support advocacy efforts

Expand research and education on grazing, especially for animals other than cattle

Interviewees emphasized the need for education, research on breeds and genetics, and veterinary support tailored to pastured goats, sheep, chickens, pigs, and bison. Focusing on animals other than cattle can support racial and economic justice because small animals are less expensive to acquire and easier to raise with limited resources, and some provide culturally important food to communities of color.

Expand research and education programs on sustainable agriculture

Interviewees discussed the power universities have over social norms in agriculture. Kara O'Connor, former Government Relations Director for the Wisconsin Farmers' Union, shared:

“Most grazing farms would blow other farms away in terms of profit per cow...But it's... gauche to talk about profit [while] it's completely socially acceptable to talk about production. [This is] reinforced by the university through research focused on [questions like] how to get more milk per cow.”

She also explained that mixed messaging from the university can be frustrating and costly for farmers:

“(When) a county conservationist...encourage(d) dairy farmers to [graze] their heifers... farmers [responded with] ‘I just built this new indoor heifer facility based on recommendations from the university...Now you're telling me to put them back outside... I can't afford to do that, I sunk all this cost into building these facilities. I've got to maximize my milk production to make the payment on them. The university needs to figure out what it thinks I should do.’”

The type of agriculture education provided at universities can also limit students' ability to understand the full range of potential agricultural systems and practices. Meghan Filbert, a diversified grazer and former Livestock Farm Viability Manager for Practical Farmers of Iowa shared how a lack of instruction on grazing at Iowa State University left her *“thinking that animals could only eat corn and soybeans.”* Meanwhile, some interviewees emphasized that there's a greater interest among students to learn about grazing and sustainable agriculture than row crop farming or confined animal production. This implies that shifting curricula toward sustainable agriculture could attract more students and funding. For example, Valerie Dantoin, Sustainable Food and Agricultural Systems Instructor at Northeast Technical College near Green Bay, WI, explained that at Northeast Technical College (NTC) the sustainable farming program is popular while Agronomy was cut and Dairy Science (focused primarily on confinement production) may face a similar fate due to lack of interest.

Cherrie Nolden, a diversified grazer and graduate student at University of Wisconsin-Madison suggested expanding the reach of university education by making agricultural programs more accessible to people in urban areas. For example, developing USDA demonstration plots along bus and bike routes near or within cities, which could be done easily for small animals raised on pasture (i.e., chickens or rabbits).

Expand research and teaching on agricultural issues beyond specific farming practices

Funding and programmatic support for agricultural research and teaching is largely focused on farming practices. However, interviewees shared that the emphasis on farming practices can deemphasize research on critical issues like racial and labor justice, agricultural subsidies, farm and industry consolidation, and access to land and capital, factors that truly dictate who can farm and how. Researchers can play a critical role in supporting sustainable agriculture and a just food system by advocating for and developing research and teaching programs on the topics mentioned above. A more detailed set of recommended actions that address these issues can be found in the full report: grasslandag.org/justtransitions.

Learn about Tribal agriculture and legal structures

Over 46 million acres of Tribal land is used for grazing and many Tribes in the Midwest region graze or are interested in grazing animals. However, many researchers have few partnerships and little understanding of Tribal agriculture or the unique legal structures that dictate Tribal sovereignty and land use. Dan Cornelius, Outreach Program Manager at the Great Lakes Indigenous Law Center emphasized:

“There needs to be more training at the University on Federal Indian law and how to effectively work with Tribes... if you don’t understand [Tribal sovereignty and culture] you’re not going to be able to build an effective relationship.”

More information on building relationships with Tribes and other communities of color can be found in [briefs for University Extension and NRCS](#).

Leverage the privilege of a degree to support advocacy efforts

Jane Jewett, Coordinator for the Midwest Perennial Forage Working Group emphasized that *“it helps to have credible people with university titles... who can push a program and make it part of state policy.”* While many academics are hesitant to engage in advocacy, others leverage their right as citizens to testify in front of state or federal legislatures, work with non-profits (e.g., the Union of Concerned Scientists) that do advocacy work, or participate in more behind the scenes ways, such as submitting public comments on potential legislation. When experts with a higher degree engage, it can lend power and authority to advocacy efforts.

Interviewees recommended the following topics for future research:

- Native forage grasses and grass species resilient to climate change
- Research on different levels of grazing intensity
- Nutritional benefits of grass-based meat and dairy
- Additional uses for hay, e.g., charcoal briquettes, building materials, alternative to plastic mulch
- Pasture-based performance testing for different breeds including animals other than cattle
- Participatory forage research or animal breeding. Several graziers mentioned that they were conducting their own on-farm research. Investing in more participatory research partnerships could support and amplify such efforts.
- Agricultural antitrust (Peter Carstensen, professor emeritus at University of Wisconsin-Madison is the only living scholar of U.S. agricultural antitrust)