



MESSENGER

WESTERN WATERSHEDS PROJECT

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BACK IN COURT FOR GREATER SAGE-GROUSE

When the Trump Administration moved to sever protections for sage grouse across 71 million acres of public lands, they must have known WWP was going to fight them in court.

LEGAL WIN TAKES OUT A MASSIVE DRILLING PROJECT IN NORTHEASTERN WYOMING

WWP and the Powder River Basin Resource Council win big against the 5,000-well Converse County oil and gas project

A WIN FOR THE SPOTTED FROG AND MIGRATORY BIRDS IN OREGON

Monitoring and agency watching-dogging resulted in Klamath Marsh National Wildlife Refuge getting a reprieve from cattle grazing.

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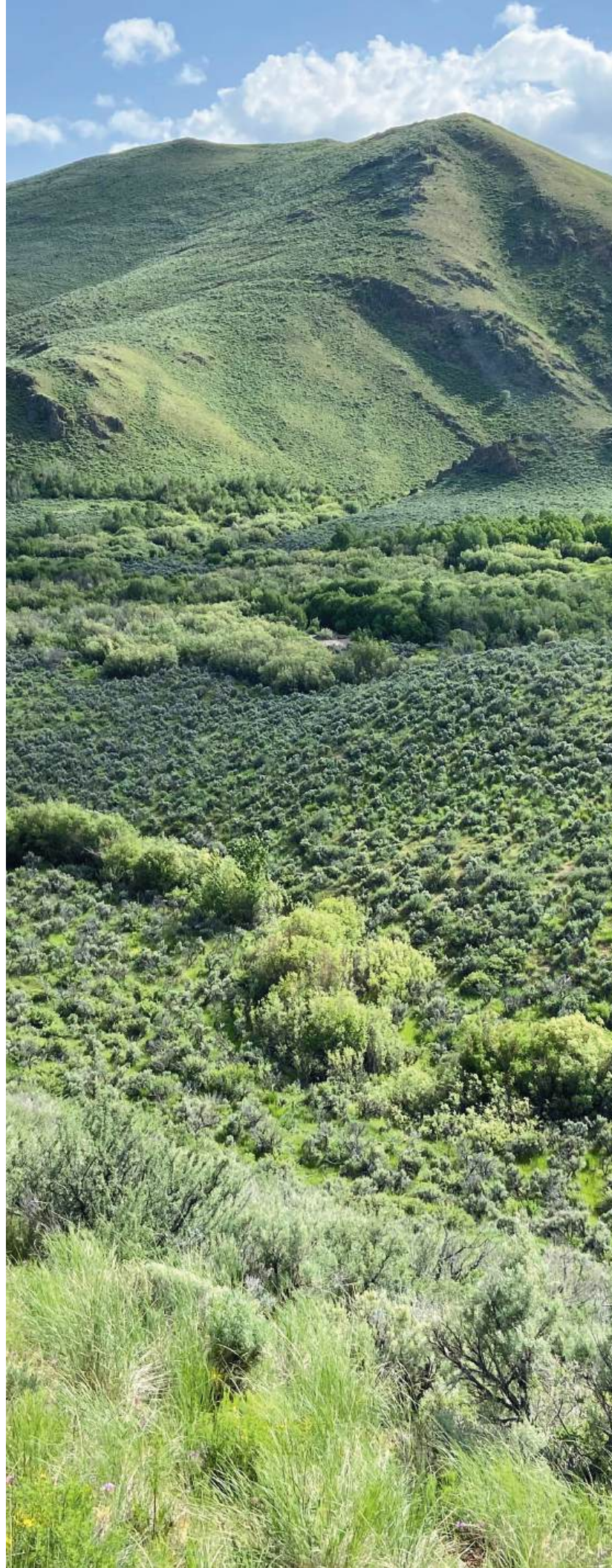




TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|--------------|
| Back in Court for Greater Sage-Grouse <i>Greta Anderson</i> | 1 |
| Saving a Success: Fighting for Rivers in Northern Nevada <i>Paul Ruprecht</i> | 2 |
| Legal Win Takes Out a Massive Drilling Project in Northeastern Wyoming <i>Erik Molvar</i> | 3-5 |
| WWP Board Member and Staff Updates | 6 |
| WWP, Union Ratify First Collective Bargaining Agreement | 6 |
| A (Quiet) Win for the Spotted Frog and Migratory Birds in an Oregon Wildlife Refuge <i>Adam Bronstein</i> | 7-8 |
| Bison Belong on the Prairie – Politics Shouldn’t Decide Otherwise <i>Patrick Kelly</i> | 9-10 |
| Restoring Point Reyes National Seashore: If the Coastal Prairie Were a Forest <i>Laura Cunningham</i> | 11-12 |

Photo: Marys River ecosystem, Paul Ruprecht/WWP.

The Watershed Messenger is edited by Greta Anderson, Erik Molvar, and Nancy Linscott, and produced in-house by Grace Kuhn.

BACK IN COURT FOR GREATER SAGE-GROUSE



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When the Trump Administration signed new decisions last December to reduce or remove protections for sage grouse across 71 million acres of federal public lands, they must have known Western Watersheds Project was going to fight them in court. Alongside our allies and with representation from Advocates for the West, we've been fighting (and winning!) for sage grouse protections for years, and the new plans do less than ever to conserve the iconic greater sage grouse and its dwindling habitat in Montana, Idaho, Colorado, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nevada, California, Utah and Wyoming.

As with past administrations, the Bureau of Land Management isn't willing to do what it will take to truly limit the harms to sage grouse habitat caused by livestock grazing, oil and gas development, and mining. From the 2015 plans that were sold as a grand compromise to protect the bird and support industrial extraction, it's only gotten worse. The first Trump Administration's attempts to overturn the 2015 were swiftly stopped by the courts, and the Biden Administration's lackluster attempt to "fix" the loopholes of the 2015 plans was never finalized except for in two states before that window closed in January 2025. Instead, the Biden Administration handed its successor a blueprint for *undoing* protections, providing an environmental impact statement that underpins the new decisions.

However, the new decisions don't adopt the previous preferred alternative and some significant changes were made to the final plans. For one, they give the states themselves authority to decide whether sage grouse merit increased protections in the future – even if there's significant population or habitat declines. The Bureau is ceding its management of public lands and permitting the industry-influenced states to determine future adjustments to management.

Another change in the final plan is the removal of 11 million acres from the designated "Priority Habitat Management Areas" or "PHMA."



Photo: Pronghorn at a sage grouse lek, Erik Molvar/WWP

This means that the few protections for PHMA that occur in the new plans will apply to fewer acres overall. The new plans also adopt ambiguity and subjectivity for livestock grazing management by abandoning science-based limits on livestock use in key habitats, while simultaneously tying the agency's hands by blocking it from intervening in cases where grazing management is showing declines.

There is nothing in the Trump plans that increases protections, despite ongoing evidence of the birds' rapid demise that has continued even under the 2015 plans that were supposed to save the species from imminent extinction. Indeed, North Dakota's sage grouse population was declared extinct last year.

And while none of this is good news for people who love the sagebrush steppe ecosystem and the myriad species that depend on it, we maintain hope that the courts will see through the smoke and mirrors (or dust and mirages?) to recognize that what is being billed as land protection is really just another industry handout to the same special interests that have had their hands out for years.

SAVING A SUCCESS: FIGHTING FOR RIVERS IN NORTHERN NEVADA

WATCH THE
SHORT FILM,
DESERT TROUT



Photo: Marys River, Paul Ruprecht/WWP



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In 1991, the Bureau of Land Management Elko District Office completed a land exchange that resulted in public acquisition of nearly 47,000 acres of private land within the Humboldt and Bruneau River watersheds in northern Nevada. As part of the agreement, numerous livestock exclosures and riparian pastures were created on the new public lands, including roughly 25,000 acres along the Marys River and several tributaries. The largest of these areas, known as the Marys River Riparian Management Area (RMA), restricted cattle use along approximately 15 miles of the Marys River watershed downstream from the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest and Jarbidge Wilderness, and along an additional twelve miles of mainstem Marys River north of Interstate 80. While there has been occasional trespass livestock in the RMA, these areas have now been closed to authorized grazing for 35 years.

The result of livestock exclusion has been amazing. The aspen, willow, and cottonwood galleries regrowing along the expanding floodplain have allowed beavers to create lush wetlands and meadows that provide habitat for threatened Lahontan cutthroat trout, amphibians like Columbia spotted frog and northern leopard frog, small mammals, and diverse pollinators. These river reaches are designated as an Important Bird Area for the many species of migratory birds that nest there, like warblers, flycatchers, Lewis's woodpecker, and sandhill crane. River otters and native mussels are also found in the Marys River, and moose that have colonized northern Nevada in recent

years find excellent habitat along the dense riparian corridors. Upland seeps and springs are important for sage-grouse, pronghorn, and mule deer. In 2025, WWP's Adam Bronstein produced a short film documenting this wildlife oasis in the high desert. *These areas show us what is possible through passive restoration, even in arid Nevada.*

In short, the watershed-scale ecological recovery along the Marys River is a roaring success—something the Bureau should be striving to replicate across the Great Basin. Instead, the Bureau is apparently considering re-opening the Marys River to cows. While it has not yet released its analysis to the public, WWP expects the agency to propose the reauthorization of grazing in the Marys River RMA as part of its upcoming decision for the Deeth grazing allotment, managed by the Wells Field Office. Depauperate streams on the Deeth allotment like Hanks Creek, which has high grazing pressure every year, provide a shocking contrast to the lush riparian habitat along the Marys River. Harm to Lahontan cutthroat trout from grazing in Hanks Creek has been reported since the 1970s, and the fish struggles to persist there. Instead of trashing the Marys River to make it look like Hanks Creek, WWP asked the Bureau to close two pastures in the Deeth allotment to protect North and South Hanks Creek from livestock and replicate the Marys River model for riparian protection and recovery. WWP expects the Bureau to release its Environmental Assessment and proposed grazing management decision for the Deeth grazing allotment in near future.

For now, the Marys River RMA is beautiful, biologically important, and cow free. WWP intends to keep it that way!

LEGAL WIN TAKES OUT A MASSIVE DRILLING PROJECT IN NORTHEASTERN WYOMING



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In northeast Wyoming, Western Watersheds Project teamed up with Powder River Basin Resource Council to end the 5,000-well Converse County oil and gas project. It's one of only a handful of multi-thousand-well projects ever to be stopped in court. Most of the lands are private, but the southernmost reaches of the Thunder Basin National Grasslands were approved for drilling under the project, and the blank check for drilling in habitats used by thousands of nesting sage grouse and birds of prey has now been shredded.

We had the best attorney on sage grouse issues—and a rising star in the legality of oil and gas decisions—representing us: Sarah Stellberg of Advocates for the West. Sarah was able to dive into the minutiae of the oil and gas industry, dissecting the legal rights and responsibilities of “fee-fee-fed” wells – oil and gas wells sited on private land, over private minerals, but which drill directionally underground into publicly-owned federal mineral deposits nearby.

This became a critical part of the case, as the Bureau of Land Management and oil industry were collaborating to approve oil and gas wells inside sage grouse Priority Habitat Management Areas (PHMA), but were hoping that re-siting the surface disturbance on private property – still sage grouse habitat, of course – would be a valid dodge to escape from restrictions on drilling in sage grouse habitats. Not so fast!

This fight has been brewing since 2009, when the State of Wyoming designated the Douglas Core Area northeast of the town of Douglas, instituting protections that specified that a maximum of 5% of the land area and one wellsite per square mile would be the maximum level of development. In 2012, Chesapeake Energy, which held oil and gas leases inside the Core Area, drew up a proposal to drill 92 additional wells. But then the State of Wyoming discovered that the Douglas Core Area already had 15.4% surface disturbance, far above the limit.

To their everlasting discredit, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service both signed off on the additional drilling, even though it violated the state sage grouse plan. And in 2014, the Bureau of Land Management announced the 5,000-well Converse County Project, which would encompass, and authorize, Chesapeake's drilling.

Photo: A section of the Thunder Basin National Grassland approved for drilling under the Converse County Oil and Gas Project, Erik Molvar/WWP.

The oil industry, and the State of Wyoming, immediately set to work carving up the Core Area to strip away protections. In July of the same year, the Governor approved a new map, carving away the northern part of the Douglas Core Area. But when the federal sage grouse plans were finalized in September of 2015, they included the original boundaries and the sage grouse disturbance limits in the original state plan. However, during the first Trump administration, the Department of Interior tried to gut the Obama-era sage grouse plans and pare down the Douglas Core Area in the process. But Western Watersheds Project and allies (again with legal representation by Advocates for the West) had challenged the inadequacy of the original plans, and we amended our complaint to sweep in the Trump plans and seek a Preliminary Injunction. Which we won, blocking the Trump plan amendments and setting the Douglas Core Area back to its original boundaries.

The stage was set.

Western Watersheds Project submitted comprehensive comments on the Converse County project, objecting to violations of sage grouse habitat protections, and stating that a plan amendment to exempt the project from the usual and customary nest buffers for birds of prey, preventing drilling and construction during the nesting season in the immediate vicinity of known nest sites used year after year, constituted ‘unnecessary or undue degradation’ of lands and habitats, a violation of federal law. We also worked with the Lakota tribes to raise the issue that oil and gas booms were associated with crime waves, and in particular a spike in Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. We demanded that the agency assess these impacts. Powder Basin Resource Council focused its comments on impacts to groundwater, to air quality, and to ranch lands owned by private property owners overlying federally owned mineral deposits, which stood to be consigned to industrial development.

The Converse County project was fast-tracked through the approval process under the first Trump administration’s policy of “energy dominance,” and finalized in December 2020, just before Trump left office. It included an amendment to the Casper Resource Management Plan applying exemptions to the raptor nest protections, to allow drilling to happen right next to known hawk and owl nest sites, throughout the nesting season. We lawyered up and filed a legal challenge against the project.

One of our first moves was to challenge some individual drilling permits, hoping to win a Preliminary Injunction to halt industrial activity while the court conserved the merits of the case. Doing their best to dodge legal accountability, the Bureau of Land Management (now under the Biden administration) started approving drilling inside sage grouse Core Areas, prioritizing wells in those “fee-fee-fed” situations where the wellsite is on private ground, giving them the best chance to avoid a legal challenge.

We took this issue head-on in our Injunction briefing, although our primary concerns were impacts to sage grouse, raptors, groundwater, and air quality. But in November 2023, the judge ruled that because our standing declarations failed to address the individual well sites involved in the injunction bid, we did not have standing to enjoin future wells (at as-yet-unknown locations). Our standing to challenge the project as a whole was well-founded, but we wouldn’t be getting an injunction blocking the drilling of individual wells.



Photo at top: Aerial of the Converse County Oil and Gas Project. Photo at bottom: Lightning strike in the Thunder Basin National Grassland, *Jasmine Molvar*.



Nonetheless, the case moved forward, and September 2024, we won our case on the merits. The ruling was based entirely on the agency’s botched analysis of drilling impacts to groundwater, in which the agency’s groundwater model mischaracterized groundwater capacity in the project area by a vast amount. The judge deferred a ruling on remedies – what the agency must do to rectify the violation of federal law – to a later date. But she did apply a temporary injunction blocking drilling while she considered whether vacatur – effectively erasing the project decision – was the proper legal remedy for the illegal Bureau of Land Management authorization of the 5,000 wells.

For our side, vacatur was essential, because it would eliminate the decision and send the agency back to the drawing board. It would also strike down the plan amendment, restoring the seasonal protections for raptor nesting habitats and requiring them for future drilling. While we waited, the 2025 Trump sage grouse plan amendments got rid of the Douglas Core Area entirely. (WWP and our allies filed a lawsuit to challenge that decision as well, but that’s another story, presented on page one). Meanwhile the battle to eliminate the 5,000-well drilling project raged on in the courts.

Then, in March of 2026, the judge handed down her final ruling, vacating the decision in its entirety. This time, the reasoning didn’t revolve around sage grouse, or birds of prey, or even groundwater, but instead on the agency’s failure to consider an adequate range of alternatives. By failing to delve into options to mitigate the effects of climate change, or consider an option to throttle the pace of development to avoid the usual boom and bust of activity that disrupts both local economies and communities, as well as wildlife and their habitats, the Bureau had committed a serious enough violation to have its decision overturned entirely.

It’s about as big a victory as possible to get against oil and gas development. We have won on oil and gas leasing in other litigation, forcing a million acres of sage grouse habitats to be pulled from oil and gas auctions. But stopping the drilling rigs and sending the agency back to the drawing board once the oil industry already has the leases is a lot harder. In many storied oil and gas battles – the Jonah Field, the Pinedale Anticline, the Powder River Basin Coalbed Methane plan – conservation groups have tried their best and come up short. This victory now joins only two other major oil and gas projects – the 1,500-well Roan Plateau project in Colorado and New Mexico’s 1,321-well Otero Mesa project – numbering more than a thousand wells and stopped by conservation lawsuits. It’s a major achievement.



BOARD AND STAFFING UPDATES



Photo above: Members of WWP Staff and Board with Kelley Weston at center.
Photo below: Ali Bronsdon with her dog, Lucy.

Western Watersheds Project is immensely grateful to Kelley Weston for his decades of service on the Board of Directors, during the majority of which he also served as Board President. Kelley stepped down from his long tenure at the end in December 2025, having watched our organization evolve from a small, scrappy Idaho-based organization to a large, scrappy national leader on public lands issues. His thoughtful dedication to the organization was always appreciated, and his insight and calm presence will be missed. Thank you, thank you, Kelley!



We've also added Ali Bronsdon as our Ninth Circuit Attorney, based in Missoula. She's passionate about dogs, mountain biking, and grizzly bears. With a background in journalism and photography and a law degree from the University of Montana, her

sensitivities to detail and powerful writing skills will serve her well in her WWP position. We couldn't be happier to have Ali on our team!

WE'VE MOVED!

After 17 years at the corner of Main Street and Croy in Hailey, WWP has moved! You can now find us one block west at 219 S River Street, Suite 203. Please note that our mailing address is still P.O. Box 1770, Hailey, ID 83333. Feel free to stop by and say hello if you're in the area.

WWP, UNION RATIFY FIRST COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGREEMENT

At a time when the labor movement and the environmental movement can use some good news, we have some to share! In July 2024, WWP staff unanimously decided to unionize, and, as of March 2026, we have a finalized and approved Collective Bargaining Agreement that will help ensure future employees enjoy the same workplace benefits.



Negotiations for the first collective bargaining agreement (CBA) began in spring 2025. Over the course of the past year, union President Cyndi Tuell and Vice President Adam Bronstein, led bargaining on behalf of staff, meeting regularly with Executive Director Erik Molvar and Board representatives Kelley Weston and Nancy

Roth to develop an agreement that reflects the strength of the organization and the commitment to support the workers of the environmental community. The union, leadership, and the Board approached negotiations in good faith, and there was a shared understanding throughout the negotiations that supporting staff strengthens WWP's ability to protect and restore western watersheds and wildlife.

The Collective Bargaining Agreement, approved unanimously by the union, leadership, and the board, formally adopts WWP's existing progressive employment practices, including the 32-hour work week, a generous vacation and sabbatical policy, workplace flexibility, and a health insurance package with premiums 100% paid by the organization.

Finalizing our Collective Bargaining Agreement marks an important milestone, but more than that, it affirms something we have known from the beginning: Western Watersheds Project is a strong organization because it values the people who do this work.



A (QUIET) WIN FOR THE SPOTTED FROG AND MIGRATORY BIRDS IN AN OREGON WILDLIFE REFUGE



Adam Bronstein, Oregon Director
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Many of WWP’s achievements happen quietly, behind the scenes. Our successes don’t always reach media outlets, social media or the court room. As our members know, we do litigate regularly and make splashy headlines, but oftentimes wins come without much fanfare and attention. This is what happened last year on the Klamath Marsh National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon.

Klamath Marsh National Wildlife Refuge, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and established in 1958 near Chemult in central Oregon, covers roughly 43,737 acres of wet meadows, open-water wetlands, and riparian corridors along the upper Williamson River, set against the Cascade Mountain Range. It provides critical habitat for migratory waterfowl, sandhill cranes, yellow rails, shorebirds, great gray owls, and Rocky Mountain elk, and is one of the last strongholds of the threatened Oregon spotted frog.

For thousands of years, the Klamath Marsh and its surrounding waterways served as the ancestral homeland of the Klamath Tribes — a confederation of the Klamath, Modoc, and Yahooskin-Paiute peoples who depended on the marsh for fishing, waterfowl hunting, and gathering roots and seeds. The marsh was the site of the Tribes’ largest village, and the Williamson River provided plentiful fish each spring that sustained communities through the lean winter months.

In 2023, WWP was notified by a landowner immediately adjacent to the marsh about cattle illegally grazing on the refuge in critical habitat for the Oregon spotted frog. WWP staff began documenting grazing by setting up trail cameras throughout the area. We sent this documentation to refuge staff. Instead of addressing the problem, they took the easy way out and issued a special use permit to the offender in an attempt to legitimize their illegal activities.



HELP KEEP THE WINS COMING!

Scan the QR code to make a tax-deductible contribution today.



Photo on pages 7 & 8: Klamath Marsh National Wildlife Refuge, Adam Bronstein/WWP

To investigate further, we submitted a Freedom of Information Act request to learn more about the grazing and haying program on the refuge. From these documents, we discovered that USFWS was issuing special use permits to hay and graze without a compatibility determination in place.

A compatibility determination is a formal written document required by law to evaluate whether a proposed or existing activity such as livestock grazing on a national wildlife refuge aligns with its conservation mission. For a use to be deemed compatible, it must be determined through sound professional judgment that it will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the refuge's specific purposes or the broader system's mission. This process involves a detailed analysis of potential environmental impacts, public review, and the establishment of specific rules or stipulations to ensure the activity supports the ecological integrity of the land. Clearly, the USFWS had none of the proper authority to issue its special use permits at Klamath Marsh.

WWP and our allies at WildEarth Guardians wrote a notice of intent to sue letter to USFWS demanding that they cease issuing annual special use permits without a compatibility determination in place. To our great surprise, they responded favorably stating that they would no longer issue new permits to hay or graze — thus avoiding litigation. This outcome is the same that we would have hoped for if we had taken them to court.

The results of our action and the USFWS' surprising concurrence aren't going unnoticed. A local landowner contacted WWP thanking us for our work stating: "This is the first year since 1958 that there have been no cows or other livestock on the Northern Klamath Marsh. The carexes, sedges, and other perennial grasses have had an opportunity to flourish. The vegetation is luxuriant and offers nesting opportunities for many grassland species."

This was a cut and dried case: The USFWS has a straightforward obligation to issue compatibility determinations before allowing domestic livestock to graze on our national wildlife refuge system, and we caught them out of compliance. We were fortunate that our work resulted in such a quick turnaround for the wildlife at Klamath Marsh, but we will remain diligent in monitoring for trespass grazing and watchdogging the agency if they seek to reissue a compatibility determination down the line. In the meantime, we'll take the win!

BISON BELONG ON THE PRAIRIE – POLITICS SHOULDN'T DECIDE OTHERWISE



Photo: A bison at American Prairie, Patrick Kelly/WWP



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Earlier this year, the Bureau of Land Management abruptly revoked grazing permits that allowed American Prairie to graze bison on several federal allotments in north-central Montana. The decision was based on the agency's novel interpretation of federal grazing law. In reality, it represents something much simpler and far more troubling: a concession to the entrenched public lands grazing lobby and the politicians aligned with it.

The permit revocation overturned years of agency analysis and a completed environmental review that originally concluded American Prairie's bison permits were lawful and appropriate. American Prairie followed every rule. The organization purchased qualifying base property, paid grazing fees, applied through the established permitting process, and participated in a full environmental assessment and public comment process. After completing that review in 2022, the Bureau issued permits authorizing bison grazing.

Livestock ranchers objected. When these public lands grazing interests failed to stop the agency from issuing permits through the normal administrative process, they turned to political pressure. The Bureau's 2026 reversal effectively tells the public that restoring a native species that shaped the prairie for thousands of years is less acceptable than maintaining the status quo of heavily subsidized cattle grazing on public lands.

I first visited American Prairie's properties and federal grazing allotments in 2023, spending time in the Missouri Breaks landscape to see firsthand how the restoration effort is unfolding.

What I saw there was remarkable: vast unfenced grasslands, thriving wildlife populations, and bison once again moving across prairie ecosystems that evolved alongside them.

Since that visit, WWP has remained engaged at every stage of the permitting fight, advocating for the restoration of bison on these public lands. We submitted formal comments, tracked the administrative proceedings, and most recently filed a detailed protest of the Bureau's proposed decision to revoke the bison permits. That protest explains why the agency's reasoning fails both legally and scientifically. In short, the decision relies on newly invented requirements that appear nowhere in federal grazing law and abandons the agency's own prior interpretations without explanation.

The stakes go far beyond one organization or one set of grazing permits. They go to the heart of how public lands are managed and whose interests those lands ultimately serve.

For more than a century, cattle grazing has dominated management of the Northern Great Plains. Yet cattle are not native to this ecosystem. Bison are. Ecologically, the distinction matters. A growing body of research shows that bison interact with prairie landscapes differently than cattle. Bison tend to move across larger areas and graze in shifting patterns that create a patchwork of vegetation heights and plant communities. This mosaic of habitats supports a wider range of prairie wildlife, from grassland birds to pronghorn and deer.

Bison also spend less time concentrated in riparian areas than cattle, reducing pressure on streams and wetlands. Studies in the Northern Great Plains have documented faster recovery of riparian vegetation, greater tree cover, and higher biodiversity in areas grazed by bison compared to traditional cattle allotments.

These ecological benefits are the result of evolutionary relationships between bison and prairie ecosystems that developed over millennia. Before European settlement, tens of millions of bison shaped the grasslands of North America through their grazing patterns, migration, and nutrient cycling. Restoring even a small portion of that ecological function is one of the most promising strategies for protecting the remaining fragments of shortgrass prairie—an ecosystem that is rapidly disappearing across the continent.

Bison restoration also carries deep cultural significance for many Indigenous nations. For tribes across the Plains, bison are not simply wildlife or livestock but relatives and cultural keystones. Several tribal governments and Indigenous organizations submitted formal protests of the Bureau's recent decision, emphasizing that restoring bison to their native range is inseparable from restoring cultural connections and ecological balance across the prairie landscape.

Yet the political backlash against bison restoration remains fierce. Much of that backlash comes from the same interests that already benefit from the highly subsidized system of public lands cattle grazing.

Public land forage provides only a tiny fraction of the nation's beef—roughly two percent of total production. Despite its small contribution to the national food supply, the system persists because of political influence and longstanding privileges that treat public forage as a hereditary entitlement.

That political influence on the 2026 proposal to revert to cattle and block bison on these allotments was evident in the celebration among cattle ranchers that followed the agency's decision. Industry groups immediately hailed the permit revocation as a major victory for public lands grazers. But public lands do not belong to a single industry. They belong to all Americans.

People who visit Montana's remaining prairie landscapes expect to see wildlife, intact ecosystems, and landscapes

resilient enough to withstand a changing climate.

Restoring bison to their native range is not nostalgia—it is a practical, science-based strategy for rebuilding ecological function across one of North America's most endangered ecosystems.

Western Watersheds Project will continue pushing for that restoration. We will keep challenging policies that prioritize private grazing interests over wildlife, ecological health, and the public interest.

The shortgrass prairie is one of the least-protected ecosystems in North America. Allowing politics to push bison back off the landscape would be a profound mistake.

Bison belong on the prairie. And we intend to keep fighting to make sure they return.



Photo: Goutham Ganesh Sivanandam, Unsplash

RESTORING POINT REYES NATIONAL SEASHORE: IF THE COASTAL PRAIRIE WERE A FOREST



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Grasslands' biodiverse native plant communities are often underappreciated. People seem immediately drawn to help defend forests. But grasslands are generally neglected in our society except as "rangelands." These ecosystems are frequently viewed through an agricultural lens rather than as complex native communities worthy of protection and restoration.

What a healthy native grassland should look like, and even if it should be managed at all, is sometimes up for debate. These questions are particularly relevant in places where grazing has shaped the landscape for decades. This is true for the grasslands at Point Reyes National Seashore, where the next phase of management is getting underway with a focus on recovery and restoration of these beautiful coastal public lands.

The 17,000 acres of the so-called "pastoral zone," land designated for commercial ranching within the Seashore, represent one of the most altered landscapes in the park. The area has been heavily grazed, fenced, mowed, and degraded for decades by beef and dairy operations.

Pastoral Zone grassland communities and soils are in severe degradation and poor health. What exists today bears little resemblance to the original coastal prairie ecosystem.



Photo: Cow-free zone: a field trip on a rainy April day at a lush native coastal prairie remnant in Point Reyes National Seashore with Idaho fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*), red fescue (*F. rubra*), and coyote brush (*Baccharis pilularis*). The tule elk trails are almost invisible to the casual glance, *Laura Cunningham/WWP*

The cattle pastures at the Seashore are not coastal prairies. Far from it. They are Eurasian domesticated annual grasslands adapted to early successional cycles and disturbance, as well as commercial agricultural remnants.

The topsoils are compacted, removed, eroding away. A huge diverse soil biome is missing. The support of a biodiverse assortment of grassland insects, herps, birds, and mammals is missing. There is little coastal prairie remaining, and almost no natural seed source to help passively reseed the barren weedy landscape. Without intervention, recovery would take many decades, if it happens at all.

To help understand this degree of impairment, imagine a clearcut and logged coniferous forest. Picture it sprayed with herbicides, the topsoil driven over and removed, and the timber sold off by the board-feet, and then planted with rows of non-native pine trees for future commercial logging operations. That is what the ecological damage in the Pastoral Zone in the National Seashore is like. The original system has been replaced by a simplified agricultural landscape.

Very little healthy, intact native coastal prairie grassland exists: only 1-2% of its original expanse on the Pacific Coast remains. What survives today persists mostly in small remnants protected from long-term disturbance. At Point Reyes, the recovery of this ecological site will be a long term project.

To enable restoration, the remnant deep-rooted native perennial bunchgrasses and wildflower communities need to be actively protected. Restoration means allowing a thatch to build up to heal barren soils, and halting major livestock disturbance so that living soil biota like mosses and fungi can return. Rebuilding healthy soil structure is one of the first steps toward restoring a functioning prairie ecosystem. Community participation in growing native seeds in local nurseries to plant back into damaged soils should be a priority in this national park unit. To help restore natural grassland fire cycles, prescribed fire should be allowed, and the Park Service should work with Tribes to return cultural fire practices. These historic stewardship practices helped maintain healthy coastal prairie for millennia.

Though the agency is promoting the use of targeted cattle grazing as a management tool for restoration, we will be monitoring and tracking the impacts of continuing cattle grazing in certain areas of the Seashore, to learn if it hinders rather than helps coastal prairie restoration.

Western Watersheds Project is studying coastal prairie remnants locally in order to determine what a healthy functioning coastal prairie looks like, in order to describe a baseline for restoration. These reference sites provide critical guidance for rebuilding damaged ecosystems. We will be sending our recommendations to the National Park Service.

The last of the departing ranchers moved their cattle off the National Seashore on April 8th of this year. Two ranches will remain. Not only should restoration of coastal prairies and other natural native plant communities and wildlife be a high priority at the Seashore, it is also a legal mandate under federal law.

The path forward for Point Reyes National Seashore should prioritize ecological recovery so that these public lands can once again support the rich biodiversity that coastal prairie ecosystems once sustained.



Photo: By September there was little grass left in places in the Seashore, and bare ground from cattle trampling lead to extensive erosion and weedy introduced annual grass invasion. These disturbed conditions are now common across large portions of the pastoral zone, Laura Cunningham/WWP



Photo: Moss forms a spongy biological soil crust underneath a deep-rooted native perennial bunchgrass Pacific reedgrass (*Calamagrostis nutkaensis*) in a patch of coastal prairie that has not seen cattle grazing in the National Seashore. These intact patches provide a glimpse of what the broader ecosystem once looked like, Laura Cunningham/WWP



Photo: Grazed pasture in the Seashore, Laura Cunningham/WWP



WESTERN WATERSHEDS PROJECT

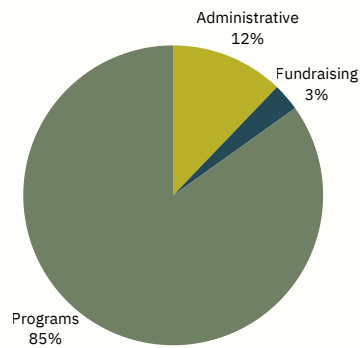
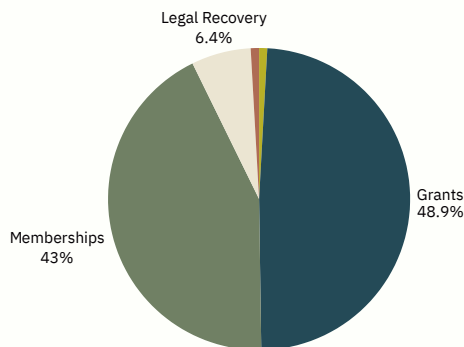
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WWP 2025 ANNUAL FINANCIAL REPORT

Income.....\$2,073,326
Expenses.....\$1,990,502
Net Income..... \$82,824

2025 Budgeted Expenses.....\$1,963,754
2026 Budgeted Expenses.....\$2,185,480
*All figures rounded.



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