

THE GRASSLANDS ALLIANCE'S CERTIFICATION STANDARD

A Practical Guide to Sustainability of Beef Cattle and Bison Grazing Operations in the U.S. and Canada

Consumers, commercial food buyers, and chefs are increasingly interested in knowing that their beef comes from well-managed ranches and farms. However, there has been little consensus about what constitutes “sustainable” rangeland and pasture management. Until now. The Grasslands Alliance—an NGO-managed, non-profit, multi-stakeholder coalition—convened ranchers, scientists, and others to develop the first voluntary sustainability standard for beef cattle and bison ranching and farming in North America. It supports all three pillars of sustainability: people, planet and prosperity. This comprehensive standard guides and measures continuous improvement of land, natural resources, and herd management. Certification recognizes ranch and farm grazing operations that protect our environment and public health; maintain high animal welfare; and treat ranchers, farmers, and workers fairly. Through this standard and certification program, the Grasslands Alliance links the producers who are using exemplary and improving stewardship practices with the retailers, chefs and consumers who want to purchase more sustainable beef.

The Grasslands Alliance standard draws on standards used by the Food Alliance and is a companion to the Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN) standard used for Rainforest Alliance certification. It is being developed through an ongoing inclusive, transparent, multi-stakeholder process following the ISEAL code of good practice in setting standards. Multiple ranchers have contributed their practical experience, while scientists and technical experts spanning the ecological, economic, and land management fields have rigorously analyzed drafts. The Grasslands Alliance board of directors makes all final decisions about the standard and certification process, guaranteeing that the standard is objective, credible, market-smart, and science-driven. The standard satisfies the principles and criteria of the Global Roundtable on Sustainable Beef.

The Grasslands Alliance standard is both a certification tool and a guide to good and continuously improving land, natural resources, and herd management on beef cattle and bison grazing (cow calf, stocker, backgrounder, and grass-finishing) operations in the United States and Canada.

A ranch or farm is eligible for certification when the Grasslands Alliance's auditors determine that it complies with all critical criteria, scores high enough overall on non-critical criteria, and commits to additional improvements before the next audit in the three-year cycle. The criteria, or desired on-the-ground “outcomes” against which auditors measure operations, are organized according to the following six principles:

I. EFFECTIVE PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Sustainable beef cattle ranching and farming requires an effective planning and management system that enables producers and auditors to confirm that operations are in compliance with the Grasslands Alliance standard. The planning process follows a simple, logical sequence that starts with assessing current conditions and conservation targets. The next step is to compare results to historic conditions to understand the short- and long-term impacts and benefits of management, and to identify improvement opportunities. Operations then develop, implement,



monitor, and (if necessary) adjust management approaches to lessen the negative impacts and increase positive benefits. This adaptive management planning cycle is designed to generate benefits, including increased productivity and efficiencies of input use, reductions in environmental impacts and greenhouse gas emissions, and increased drought resilience.

2. WILDLIFE HABITAT AND BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

The Grasslands Alliance standard requires ranchers and farmers to protect existing ecosystems and avoid overgrazing, deforestation, and other forms of habitat degradation and land conversion. Certified ranches and farms contribute to conservation in the broader landscape by maintaining riparian habitats, waterways, and the ability of fish and wildlife to migrate; by collaborating with neighbors, agencies, and other organizations implementing conservation activities; and by avoiding impacts to surrounding natural ecosystems and protected areas. Operations conserve the diversity of native plant and wildlife species—especially rare, threatened, and endangered species—by sustainably managing natural ecosystems, taking proactive steps to minimize conflicts with predators and other native wildlife, and carefully implementing integrated pest management (IPM) activities to avoid unintended consequences. Activities and policies of the operation comply with regional, state, and federal regulations and management plans. This principle recognizes the important role of well-managed ranches and farms in conserving America’s natural heritage.

3. NATURAL RESOURCE CONSERVATION

Certified operations conserve the natural resources that are the basis of sustainable ranching and farming, optimize efficiencies of input use, and minimize pollution. Resource-specific objectives and outcomes are described for six sub-principles:

3.1 PRODUCTIVITY AND MANAGEMENT OF RANGELAND VEGETATION, PASTURE FORAGE, AND FEED CROPS

Ranches and farms that meet this principle are implementing grazing and forage management practices that maintain or improve rangeland health, pasture condition, and (where applicable) feed crop productivity. Operations carefully plan both grazing and vegetation management practices (e.g., forage enhancements such as prescribed fire, brush removal, and IPM applications) to avoid unintended consequences, maintain or improve ecological integrity, and cut input costs. Efforts to prevent and control invasive plants maintain vegetation health and minimize the need for herbicides, which are not only costly, but can threaten the health of workers, communities, and the environment. The standard requires that ranches and farms utilize feed crops raised in a manner that reflects Grasslands Alliance principles, whether produced on or off the farm. Meeting

this sub-principle can help producers extend the growing season, reduce supplemental feed costs, improve livestock weight gain and sales prices, and enhance resilience to drought and other risks to forage and feed supplies.

3.2 SOIL CONSERVATION AND SOIL HEALTH

The standard recognizes ranches and farms that demonstrate good stewardship of soil health: the very foundation of successful ranching and farming. This sub-principle fosters grazing regimes that are appropriate to local soil conditions, and strategically placed water sources and attractants that optimize livestock distribution. Good livestock distribution, in turn, minimizes erosion and compaction, evenly distributes manure nutrients, and maintains soil fertility and forage productivity at locally appropriate levels. Since healthy soils absorb more rainfall, slow runoff, and store more water, additional benefits include reduced erosion and sediment pollution of waterways and increased drought resilience. Also, optimizing soil health can cut fertilizer costs and pollution-related risks.

3.3 WATER CONSERVATION AND WATER QUALITY

Water conservation means ensuring that water is efficiently delivered to animals and crops, preventing depletion of waterways and aquifers, and using the minimum quantity of water necessary for production. Operations must have the proper permits for water use and utilize efficient practices (e.g., timing of water applications) and equipment technologies that optimize the quantity and duration of fresh water from various sources available for livestock, as well as for locally important fish and wildlife. Optimizing water use efficiency reduces costs on both water fees and energy for irrigation pumping. It also enhances water quality and supply, improving vegetation health and fish and wildlife habitat.

Protecting water quality includes minimizing water pollution through well-managed grazing and precise nutrient and pesticide management that prevents runoff into surface and ground waters. Certified ranches and farms minimize contamination of on-ranch waterways by pollutants, such as sediment, nutrients, pathogens, applied inputs, and oil from vehicles and equipment. As a result, water leaving the ranch and entering public waterways is clean, maintaining the health of aquatic ecosystems and minimizing the health, business, and environmental risks posed by water pollution.

3.4 INTEGRATED PEST MANAGEMENT (IPM)

The standard prohibits and/or restricts the use of high toxicity pesticides and requires that ranches and farms use an integrated approach to prevent, control, and manage invasive plants and other pests while minimizing impacts to human health and the environment. IPM emphasizes the full range of pest management tactics: prevention, avoidance, monitoring, and—where necessary—suppression. Suppression tactics involve an appropriate balance of

biological, mechanical, and chemical control agents to minimize damage to native vegetation, pollinators, wildlife, and ecosystem processes while controlling weeds and other pests. Certified operations only use pesticides when necessary. They minimize specific health and environmental threats associated with pesticide use by implementing required risk management practices and recording all agrochemical use. The standard prohibits use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

3.5 NUTRIENT AND MANURE MANAGEMENT

This sub-principle pertains to operations that apply fertilizer or animal manure to pasture and/or croplands, and/or that store or process manure produced on backgrounding and winter-feeding lots or other facilities. These ranches and farms must develop and implement a nutrient management plan that details how the operation recycles nutrients, and balances nutrient inputs with nutrient use. The standard requires that manure storage and processing facilities and practices, as well as applications of manure and synthetic fertilizers, minimize impacts to surface and groundwater quality; air quality; soil health; and the health of animals, workers and communities. Ranches and farms maintain and calibrate application equipment to ensure precise fertilization rates. For operations that apply biosolids from external sources, the standard requires that they be screened for contaminants that may pose risks to natural resources, public health, and animal welfare. Effectively implemented nutrient and manure management improves efficiencies, reduces fertilizer costs, and reduces pollution-related risks.

3.6 SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT

Certified ranches and farms minimize solid waste through reducing, reusing, recycling, and composting materials, and by sourcing materials and inputs that minimize waste byproducts (e.g., purchasing in bulk and using recyclable, reusable or compostable containers). Waste storage, treatment and disposal facilities are sited, designed and maintained in ways that minimize health and environmental impacts. Operations are clean and free of litter, reducing related health, safety and environmental hazards.

4. IMPROVED LIVELIHOODS AND WELL BEING

This principle promotes the livelihoods, safety, and well being of workers and their communities, above and beyond those protections granted by law. Certified ranches and farms contribute to local economic development through employment and worker training that improves worker skills and the operation's effectiveness as a whole. Personnel have the right to establish and join worker organizations of their own free choice without employer influence and interference. The standard prohibits discrimination and requires that labor policies be clearly communicated. Compulsory and child labor

are both prohibited, although children may participate in tasks and chores appropriate to their age. The standard contains criteria for establishing safe working conditions, avoiding the effects of agrochemicals on workers and communities, identifying potential dangers, and preparing for emergencies.

5. HEALTHY AND HUMANE TREATMENT OF ANIMALS

Compliance with this principle ensures high animal welfare from birth to slaughter through a herd health plan requiring record-keeping, proper nutrition, prompt resolution of health issues, low-stress handling, proper sanitation of infrastructure such as shelters or housing, and overall good animal husbandry. The standard prohibits use of non-therapeutic antibiotics (routine use for preventative medication or promotion of higher production), beta-agonists, growth-promoting hormones, and substances such as feed containing animal by-products. Infrastructure and handling facilities must be clean and well-maintained and ensure the safety of animals and handlers. Transportation to and from facilities is conducted safely and humanely.

6. CLIMATE-SMART RANCHING AND FARMING

This standard recognizes operations that have optimized grazing, herd, land, and nutrient management to reduce and minimize their carbon footprint and net emissions of greenhouse gases. It encourages well-managed grazing and other management activities that reduce emissions of carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide, while increasing carbon sequestration to the site's potential. It guides operations in optimizing feed and breed selection to reduce and minimize emissions of methane (both enteric methane emitted from cattle rumen and manure methane) and nitrous oxide (emitted from manure and fertilizer management). Certified ranches and farms avoid conversion of natural ecosystems to croplands and pastures. They can receive credit for restoring degraded lands and croplands to perennial pasture, and for utilizing conservation tillage, no-till, and other practices (where applicable) that increase carbon sequestration. The standard requires operations to manage nutrients and manure in a manner that proactively reduces methane and nitrous oxide emissions. Operations can achieve additional emissions reductions by improving energy and fuel efficiency, using renewable energy, and reducing use of petroleum-based inputs. Since climate-smart ranching strategies focus primarily on improving production efficiencies, management quality, and resilience to extreme weather, they offer economic opportunities to producers and help mitigate business risks.

For more information about the Grasslands Alliance's certification standard and program, please visit www.GrasslandsAlliance.org.