



AUDUBON CONSERVATION RANCHING

PROGRAM PROTOCOLS

REGION:

September 2023

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Native grasslands are among the most altered and imperiled ecosystems in the world and one of the least protected. Throughout the U.S., Mexico, and Canada, these critical ecosystems are dwindling at an alarming rate as tracts are fragmented and degraded through unsustainable agricultural uses, proliferation of invasive plants and vegetation, encroaching human development, and poor grazing practices. As a result, many birds and other wildlife are edging closer to endangerment and even extinction.

Audubon addresses loss in ecosystem function and health through the conservation of focal bird species and the habitat they depend upon. We help the environment by helping birds. Since the majority of remaining grasslands are privately owned, grassland bird conservation can only be achieved through cooperative approaches that work with the farmers and ranchers that live and work on these lands. The Audubon Conservation Ranching program (ACR) is an innovative, market-based approach that connects conservation-conscious consumers to farmers and ranchers that employ bird-friendly management practices in raising their livestock.

Each participating rancher will adopt a Habitat Management Plan (HMP) that is uniquely developed for their operation to address site-specific habitat and bird conservation opportunities. These plans are adaptive and can be modified over time to address changes in the landscape and landowner objectives. Audubon uses a "Bird-friendliness Index" to monitor birds on every certified ranch.

Program certification is achieved by following the HMP and a set of program protocols. The program rewards Audubon-certified ranchers by connecting them to premium consumer markets, thus providing continuing benefits to birds and people that share the land. Program certification is maintained annually through a third-party verification audit.

Regional Priority/Target Grassland Bird Species

PROGRAM STANDARDS

ACR program standards are a set of rules and expectations that must be met for program certification. Principle among these is adherence to an Audubon-approved Habitat Management Plan (HMP). These standards provide a framework for participating producers to sustainably

manage farms and ranches to benefit grassland bird species, while meeting specified practices for grassland and pasture management, forage consumption, animal health and welfare, and environmental sustainability. The annual third party verification process provides assurance to consumers that Audubon-certified products meet program standards.

To receive and maintain certification, all properties enrolled in ACR must meet standards in 3 key areas:

1. HABITAT MANAGEMENT
2. ANIMAL HEALTH AND WELFARE
3. ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

HABITAT MANAGEMENT

ACR protocols aim to prevent the loss of native grassland, restore and enhance habitat for grassland birds, and minimize or eliminate practices that might negatively impact habitat quality, nest success, and abundance of grassland birds and other wildlife.

Each farm or ranch certified through ACR must meet a set of protocols for bird habitat management that occur at 3 levels:

1. General protocols that apply to every participating farm or ranch.
2. Regional habitat management protocols that define specific management requirements and performance benchmarks appropriate the target bird species conservation in that state or ecoregion.
3. Ranch-specific management requirements established in an Audubon-approved Habitat Management Plan (HMP).

REGIONAL HABITAT MANAGEMENT

Regional Description...

Habitat Management Plans (HMP)

The approved HMP for each participating farm or ranch must include:

- An Ecological Site Description.
- National Wetlands Inventory maps where applicable.
- A list of priority bird species and description of general habitat needs.
- A brief, farm-scale review of the current extent and quality of habitat available to priority birds.
- An accurately-marked Plan Map (e.g., aerial photo, hand-drawn map, etc.) which includes the following:
 - A unique identification number for each pasture or field unit. (The use of Tract and Field Numbers assigned to properties enrolled in USDA Farm Services Agency programs is preferred.)
 - Identification of vegetative cover for each unique pasture/field unit (i.e., grass or crop species, forest type, etc.).
 - Identification of any important bird habitat management/protection areas (e.g. roosts, leks, prairie dog towns, wetlands).
 - A list of invasive/noxious weeds present on the farm.
 - A reference to existing conservation or management plans, such as NRCS/SWCD Soil and Water Conservation Plans, and the areas of the property to which they apply.

General and/or pasture/field-level habitat management goals and objectives:

1. A defined grazing system, plan, or approach.

2. Management actions, which may include fire management, mechanical harvest/removal, planting, or other actions needed to meet the management objective.
3. Timeline for accomplishing management objectives. This may include an outline of annual milestones/actions to accomplish each management objective.
4. Monitoring to be conducted to measure success in meeting management goals and increasing abundance of target bird species.
5. Reference to detailed management guidance provided by accompanying fact sheets or internet-based information sources.
6. Reference to cost-share, incentive, or grant programs applicable to assist with plan implementation.

The HMP is intended to be adaptive. Changes are expected to occur over time, with significant changes approved by Audubon staff.

ANIMAL HEALTH AND WELFARE

ACR is focused on the restoration and maintenance of healthy, native grasslands that are managed largely or in part through sustainable grazing practices. Audubon recognizes that ranch operations and practices will vary across the landscape and depending upon the scale of operations and that producers understand and are committed to properly caring for livestock. All ranchers and producers participating in Audubon's Conservation Ranching Program must adhere to livestock production methods that reflect best practices for animal health and welfare. Persons who willfully mistreat animals will not be tolerated in this program. Protocols provide the minimum requirements for the care and handling of livestock.

ACR embraces the five freedoms of animal welfare. The Five Freedoms are globally recognized as the gold standard in animal welfare, encompassing both the mental and physical well-being of animals; they include:

1. Freedom from Hunger and Thirst by ready access to fresh water and diet to maintain health and vigor.
2. Freedom from Discomfort by providing an appropriate environment.
3. Freedom from Pain, Injury or Disease by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment.
4. Freedom to Express Normal Behavior by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind.
5. Freedom from Fear and Distress by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

ACR seeks to demonstrate that cattle/bison ranching can be an integral part of a healthy grassland ecosystem. Bird conservation is the ultimate goal of the certification, but this comes with the expectation that ranch management practices will lead to more broad environmental benefits. Environmental sustainability protocols ensure that ranching practices will result in cleaner streams, healthier soils, more pollinators for plants, and more carbon stored in the soil.

In addition to Environmental Sustainability protocols, ranches are encouraged to observe the 6 principles of soil health when making management decisions. Those principles are:

1. Keep the soil covered. Living and dead plant material shields the soil from the elements and creates the best conditions for soil microorganisms.
2. Optimize soil disturbance. This includes limiting biological disturbance through overgrazing, chemical disturbance through overuse of chemical fertilizers or pesticides, and physical disturbance through tillage and animal impact.
3. Encourage diversity of plant species in the soil. Each type of plant has a unique root system and a unique role in maintaining the soil food web.
4. Keep living roots in the soil as many days of the year as possible. On rangelands, a diversity of plants will help meet this goal.
5. Livestock synergism. Utilizing livestock as a tool to build soils and displace use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides produces compounding benefits to farms and ranches.
6. Know your context. Understand how the ecosystem processes function on the land and what enables those processes to function. Soil type, plant communities, weather and climate patterns, crop rotation, topography, available equipment, labor, management practices and management style, all impact the other 5 principles.

PROGRAM AUDITING AND CERTIFICATION

Certification is granted to farms or ranches that demonstrate compliance with the protocols contained within applicable ACR Standards, as described below. Failure to meet these requirements will lead to the denial or withdrawal of certification for the audited farm or ranch. Standards include both Required (R) and Suggested (S) protocols.

Required (R) protocols are designated as R, R(3), or R(3+):

- R protocols are the most critical and require full compliance prior to certification being granted.
- R(3) protocols require full compliance by the end of the third year of certification. The three-year transition period for these protocols recognizes additional time may be needed for operations to plan, finance, and implement certain program requirements.
- R(3+) protocols may take longer than three years to fully implement, and this will be noted on the HMP.

Suggested (S) protocols are aimed at encouraging continual improvement on enrolled farms and ranches. Noncompliance with one or a few of these Suggested protocols will not result in denial of certification. However, operators must demonstrate continual progress in meeting Suggested protocols with each successive audit until conformance with at least 75% of applicable Suggested protocols is achieved within 10 years.

Year 1 Required Protocols

GENERAL HABITAT MANAGEMENT PROTOCOLS	
1.1 R	Remnant native habitats must not be converted.
1.2 R	Reduction in perennial grassland acreage is prohibited (unless specifically noted in the HMP). Renovation of introduced grass plantings is allowed if reseeded to more beneficial perennial grassland or annual forages necessary to implement HMP grazing plans.
1.3 R	New perennial plantings are limited to those that are approved in the HMP. Exotic forages may be planted into croplands as short-term cover crops, and these may be grazed for forage to reduce pressure on wildlife-friendly pastures and facilitate forage-based finishing of livestock.
1.4 R	Fragmentation of grassland must be minimized wherever practicable according to the recommendations of the HMP. New infrastructure needed to support agriculture must be placed as near as possible to existing roads or other development. Wherever practicable, efforts shall be made to minimize fragmentation and habitat impacts in the siting of energy resource development facilities and road networks.
1.5 R	In the event of development of wind or solar energy facilities, enrolled farms and ranches should work with energy companies to: 1) site new infrastructure to minimize habitat fragmentation; and 2) minimize impacts to wildlife in the construction and operation of energy facilities.
1.6 R	Where reclamation of disturbed areas occurs (e.g., oil and gas pads, go-back lands, watering, salt, bedgrounds, erosional features, relocated roads, etc.), the seed mix must be comprised of native species.
REGIONAL HABITAT MANAGEMENT PROTOCOLS	
2.1 R	
2.2 R	
Habitat Management Plan (HMP)	
3.1 R	The HMP has been developed in partnership with or under the direction of

	Audubon staff.
3.2 R	A grazing system has been developed that defines combination of stocking rate, rest and rotation that improves range quality and grassland bird habitat over time.
3.3 R	Some technique is used to monitor range condition by pasture or paddock to ensure habitat goals are met according to the HMP. Range condition should be documented when livestock are moved among pastures.

ANIMAL HEALTH AND WELFARE

4.1 R	No feedlots or confined feeding operations are permitted. (See Appendix A for definition)
4.2 R	Any feedstocks must always supplement onsite grassland forage and should never be the sole dietary option, except as an interim measure during certain life stages, adverse weather, periods when in-pasture forage is limiting or insufficient.
4.3 R	Consumption of grains must be within a balanced ruminant diet that maintains the animal's ability to efficiently digest natural forages.
4.4 R	Clean sources of water must be constantly provided to all cattle/bison throughout the year, and cattle/bison must be provided with adequate nutrition to meet their daily needs at all times of the year.
4.4 R	No feed may contain antibiotics or ionophores.
4.6 R	No feed or mineral supplements may contain animal byproducts.
4.7 R	The use of growth promoting hormones (including implants) or other growth promotants is not permitted. Use of hormones for estrus synchronization is permitted.
4.8 R	Sub-therapeutic antibiotic use in any form (feed, mineral supplements, water, etc.) is strictly prohibited.
4.9 R	Sick or injured animals must be treated to relieve their symptoms. Animals treated with antibiotics (including injectables and feed additives) for injury or illness must be tagged or marked as they are no longer eligible for the program. A sick or suffering animal that is unlikely to heal must be promptly euthanized by a method that minimizes suffering.
4.10 R	Cattle/bison shall be kept in good health status at all times. Body Condition Scores (BCS) should fall within the BCS 4 – 7 range throughout the year for each class of cattle/bison for minimum of 90% of all cattle/bison on the farm/ranch. Note: The Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) has a BCS chart that details body condition scoring and provides images as well as scoring ranges. This can be found at www.cowbcs.info
4.11 R	Herd health and vaccination records must be maintained on cattle/bison at all times.
4.12 R	The handling and movement of cattle/bison must be done calmly, quietly, and humanely to prevent stress or injury. Electric prods are only to be used when the animal or a person is in jeopardy and only then as a means of last resort.
4.13 R	Cattle/bison should remain on healthy pastures and shall not be confined

	in a corral except where providing veterinary care, for protection against inclement weather, biosecurity or when handling and shipping.
4.14 R	A clean environment is provided to livestock after any procedure (example: castration, vaccination, branding) to minimize risk of infection.
4.15 R	Livestock may be purchased from non-Audubon Certified operations, provided: a) documentation of prior administration of vaccinations and/or medications is obtained from the seller; and b) an affidavit is obtained from the seller attesting that the animals were raised in conformance with the following criteria: • Sub-therapeutic antibiotic use is strictly prohibited. Animals treated with antibiotics (including injectable and feed additives) for injury or illness must be tagged or marked as they are not eligible for the program. • Animals must not be fed any animal by-products or be treated with hormones of any type. No feed may contain antibiotics or ionophores
4.16 R	Livestock must spend a minimum of the last 6 months of their lives on Audubon-certified lands.
4.17 R	All slaughter facilities used by producers must be USDA-Inspected or State inspected. For State-inspected facilities, Declaration of Product ID and Integrity must be signed by slaughter facility, indicating the facility can demonstrate clear chain of custody for Audubon Certified livestock and/or livestock products, and the operation meets or exceeds industry standards for animal handling.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

5.1 R	Broadcast spraying of any chemical insecticide, herbicide, or fungicide is prohibited, unless specifically approved in the HMP for the control of undesirable species or vegetation.
5.2 R	Pesticides containing "Neonicotinoid" substances must be avoided.
5.3 R	Poisons must not be used to control predators.
5.4 R	Control measures for internal and external parasites must be limited to products that do not negatively impact non-target organisms. (Ivermectin is not allowed. Moxidectin/Cydectin is allowed). Spray-on or drench products should be applied in a corral or working chute if possible to avoid contamination of pastures.
5.5 R	Any supplemental feed should be spatially dispersed or presented in moveable feed bunks to minimize damage to soil health and conditions.

Year 3 and 3+ Required Protocols

GENERAL HABITAT MANAGEMENT	
1.7 R(3)	All stock water tanks shall be equipped with wildlife escape routes unless they are empty.
1.8 R(3)	At least 75% of grazing lands on the farm or ranch must be managed for beneficial habitat for priority bird species as outlined in the HMP.
1.9 R(3)	Open grasslands across the farm or ranch must be maintained and/or increased. Tree encroachment should be prevented, where practicable, according to recommendations of the HMP, and new tree planting in grassland areas is prohibited, except for new plantings adjacent to farmsteads, buildings, riparian areas, etc.
1.10 R(3)	Efforts must be undertaken to control invasive species within native grasslands, according to the recommendations of the HMP. Control of invasive woody plants is required, where possible, except where native shrubs less than 15 feet tall are desirable for thermal and escape cover.
REGIONAL HABITAT MANAGEMENT	
Habitat Management Plan (HMP)	
3.4 R(3)	Grazing plan or approach occurs according to the HMP, resulting in habitat heterogeneity, characterized by non-uniform vegetation structure and diverse species composition across the ranch. Documentation of herd rotation among paddocks/pastures is maintained.

3.5 R(3)	Fire management, mechanical harvest/removal, planting, and other management actions are being implemented according to the HMP.
ANIMAL HEALTH AND WELFARE	
4.18 R(3)	Weaning will occur after calves are at least 6 months old (average age). Exceptions are allowable for natural disasters (drought, flood, blizzard) where early weaning is likely to be beneficial for animal welfare and/or natural resources, with documentation identifying the event, date, and average age of calves at weaning. Weaning methods must minimize stress on both the cow and calf.
4.19 R(3)	Animals must be loaded on transport trailers in a calm manner, using ramps and flooring that minimize slipping. Do not overload, all animals must have space to stand naturally within trailers with all feet on the ground. Transporting non-ambulatory or injured animals off the ranch for (sale?) any reason other than to access veterinary care is prohibited.
4.20 R(3+)	Any new cattle/bison handling facilities must be constructed and maintained to facilitate ease of cattle/bison handling, comfort, safety, and calmness. Suggested guidelines for the construction and design of facilities can be found at www.grandin.com .
ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY	
5.6 R(3)	Unless specifically allowed in the HMP, grazing livestock may not have unrestricted access to riparian areas along streams second order or larger. Wetlands such as springs or fens may require similar protections as outlined in the HMP.
5.7 R(3)	Measures must be taken to protect streams second order or larger from contamination by sediment, manure, or chemicals. Restricted access and buffers may be required, if specified in the HMP. Wetlands such as springs or fens may require similar protections, as outlined in the HMP.
5.8 R(3+)	Purchased forage should not be sourced from land converted from native habitats after 2015 (inception of ACR program).
5.9(R3)	Seed treated with 'Neonicotinoid' insecticide seed dressings must be avoided. If equivalent non-treated seed is not commercially available within 150 miles. Producer must provide written documentation that at least three potential vendors were contacted.
5.10(R3)	Organic and Inorganic fertilizer application must be made according to recommended application rates.

Suggested Protocols

GENERAL HABITAT MANAGEMENT	
1.11 S	Hay, haylage or silage operations should minimize direct impacts on wildlife by using a flushing bar. Cutting from the outside of the field into the middle should be avoided to prevent trapping or killing wildlife.
REGIONAL HABITAT MANAGEMENT	

ANIMAL HEALTH AND WELFARE	
4.21 S	Livestock are gradually separated at weaning (e.g. fenceline weaning, 2-step weaning). https://www.beefresearch.ca/research-topic.cfm/weaning-65
4.22 S	Animal transport time will not exceed 16 hours. Transport times that are likely to exceed this must provide an opportunity to unload cattle and provide them access to feed, clean water, and resting area for at least 8 hours before reloading.
ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY	
5.11 S	No genetically engineered crops should be grown anywhere on the farm or ranch.
5.12 S	Chemical fallow should not be used to kill annual weeds after winter cereal crops are harvested unless approved in the HMP.
5.13 S	No genetically modified (GMOs) seeds or crops should be used in feed or food products (e.g. Roundup Ready or Bt crops).

Animal Feeding Operation:

Animal Feeding Operations (AFOs) are agricultural operations where animals are kept and raised in confined situations. An AFO is a lot or facility (other than an aquatic animal production facility) where the following conditions are met:

- Animals have been, are, or will be stabled or confined and fed or maintained for a total of 45 days or more in any 12-month period; *and*
- Crops, vegetation, forage growth, or post-harvest residues are not sustained in the normal growing season over any portion of the lot or facility.

Declaration of Compliance and Understanding

I hereby agree to comply with the Audubon Conservation Ranching Program Protocols related to habitat management, forage and feeding, animal health and welfare, and environmental sustainability. My signature below acknowledges my understanding and agreement to implement the practices identified within the approved Habitat Management Plan for my ranch/farm operation.

I understand that bird species must be monitored as part of the certification of my property. I agree to allow staff of the Bird Conservancy of the Rockies (or other Audubon partner) to enter my property and conduct this required monitoring. Monitoring results will be provided to me, shared with conservation planners, and may also be shared with the public via Audubon and retail marketing venues.

I understand that my participation in the Conservation Ranching Program is contingent on my cooperation and compliance with program protocols, and that this compliance will be verified through an annual ranch audit. Audubon retains the right to deny program participation if I fail to meet or make progress toward Habitat Management Plan implementation based on certification audit results.

I am fully aware that I may withdraw my participation in the Audubon Conservation Ranching Program at any time in written form.

Name (printed): _____ Date: _____

Signature: _____

Name (printed): _____ Date: _____

Signature: _____

Audubon Conservation Ranching Program Affidavit – Purchased Animals

Required Criteria for Purchased Animals

Operations participating in the Audubon Conservation Ranching Program may purchase young animals from non-Audubon Certified operations, provided an affidavit is obtained from the seller attesting that animals were raised in conformance with the following criteria:

1. Sub-therapeutic antibiotic use is strictly prohibited. Animals treated with antibiotics (including injectables and feed additives) for injury or illness must be tagged or marked as they are not eligible for the program.
2. Animals must not be fed any animal byproducts or be treated with hormones of any type.
3. No feed may contain antibiotics or ionophores.

Declaration: By signing below, the seller and purchaser of livestock to be sold through the Audubon certification program declare that the above listed criteria have been met.

NAME OF SUPPLIER: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _

NAME OF PURCHASER: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Signature: _____

Date:

Declaration of Product ID and Integrity for Livestock Slaughter and Meat Processing Facilities Handling Audubon-Certified Products

I attest, as a representative of:

Name of Service Provider (please print)

that appropriate steps are being taken to preserve the identity and protect the integrity of products being handled on behalf of:

Name of Audubon-Certified Operation or Business

These steps include, but are not limited to:

- **Animal/Product Segregation and Tracking:** The operation can demonstrate clear chain of custody for Audubon Certified livestock and/or livestock products, with records that document intake and origin of animals/products, segregation and tracking through slaughter, processing, and packaging, for each lot of final product bearing an Audubon Certified content claim. Steps are taken to ensure there is no commingling of like products (certified and non-certified).
- **Food Safety and Consumer Protection:** The operation has internal programs that monitor and ensure the continued safety and security of live animals and livestock products within their custody. The operation is in compliance with USDA or State inspection requirements, and meets federal and state employment regulations.
- **Animal Handling:** The operation meets or exceeds industry standards for animal handling and welfare. When handling Audubon Certified live animals, the operation complies with Audubon guidelines which prohibit treating or feeding livestock with antibiotics or growth- promoting hormones.

I declare that the foregoing is true and correct.

Name (printed): _____ Date: _____

Signature:

Title (printed):

Audubon Conservation Ranching Program
Certificate of Eligibility and Affidavit
(To be Submitted to Processing Plant)

The undersigned certifies that the following animals were raised in conformance with the third-party verified Audubon certification:

_____ head of heifers under 30 months of age

_____ head of 3 year old cows

_____ head of butcher cows 4 years and older

_____ head of bulls under 30 months of age

_____ head of bulls over 30 months of age

PLEASE LIST TAG NUMBERS ON REVERSE SIDE BY CLASS.

Attach source and age verification records.

The undersigned attests that these animals were raised in conformance with the following criteria:

1. Animals lived the last 6 months of their lives on Audubon-certified ranch(es).
2. Animals were never treated with antibiotics (including injectables and feed additives).
3. Animals were never fed any animal by-products or be treated with hormones of any type.
4. Animals were never fed any feed containing antibiotics or ionophores.
5. Animals were never confined in a feedlot.
6. Any In-pasture feeding of grain and/or high-energy/high protein feedstocks did not exceed 1.5% of the animal's body weight per day, and did not exceed 90 days in a calendar year.

Declaration: By signing below, the seller of livestock declares that the above listed criteria have been met for all animals being sold and marketed through the Audubon certification.

NAME OF SUPPLIER: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

