

FOLIO 2

Conservation on Working Lands

Greater sage-grouse and cattle in the U.S. state of Wyoming. Photo: Evan Barrientos/Audubon

Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) established the goal of effectively conserving and managing 30 percent of lands, waters, and seas by 2030 (“30x30”, or [Target 3](#)). This series of Audubon briefs features practical, action-oriented options for reaching the 30x30 target through a variety of approaches that deliver benefits for biodiversity, communities, and the climate.

Conservation on Working Lands

Working lands, defined here as lands with a primary purpose of agriculture, grazing, or forestry, can be managed to provide long-term conservation benefits. The appropriate practices vary by land use, geography, and ecosystem. Examples may include permanent set-asides or easements for riparian areas or other areas of natural habitat within working landscapes, implementing adaptive grazing in grassland ecosystems, regularly flooding productive lands during bird migration to provide seasonal habitat, or bird-friendly forestry practices. Implementing effective conservation practices in working lands is an effective biodiversity conservation tool in areas with significant private land ownership. For example, in the Eastern United States up to 68% of the areas most used by forest birds during the breeding season are privately owned, working forests.

Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures

“Other effective conservation measures” (OECMs) can contribute towards the achievement of 30x30 goals. OECMs are defined as “geographically defined area(s) other than a Protected Area, which (are) governed and managed in ways that achieve positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the in situ conservation of biodiversity, with associated ecosystem functions and services and, where applicable, cultural, spiritual, socioeconomic, and other locally relevant values.” OECMs are not protected areas. They do not need to be managed primarily for conservation, but do need clear management and governance, and must provide effective long-term conservation as a result of management activities. Working lands that are subject to long-term conservation management practices such as those described above, may be considered “other effective area-based conservation measures” (OECMs).

Opportunity

The evaluation of an area managed for long-term conservation benefits within a working landscape and recognition of this area as an OECM may allow it to contribute towards the achievement of 30x30 targets at a national and global scale. Some governments have already established processes for formally recognizing OECMs; further consideration of OECMs in working lands may enhance these processes. Globally, UNEP-WCMC has established a [database of OECMs](#) and associated screening process. While appropriate practices vary from location to location, the opportunity to deploy OECMs on working lands is worth exploring.

Case Studies

Bird-friendly livestock

Across the grasslands of the United States, ranchers are replacing introduced pasture grasses with native

grassland species and managing grazing to stimulate natural disturbance regimes, supporting ecosystem recovery. Restored grasslands provide a myriad of benefits, from better water retention to increased soil carbon and enhanced tolerance to changing climate conditions. Native grasses serve as excellent forage for bison and cattle herds, helping family ranchers stay on their lands. In many places, restored and well-managed grasslands have demonstrated significant success in increasing the diversity and numbers of grassland bird species. In Colombia, trees and bushes are being reintroduced to cattle pasture in silvopastoral systems, again demonstrating biodiversity and ecosystem benefits alongside economic value. Ranches that are managed to conserve and restore native grasslands with long-term biodiversity outcomes in mind may serve as positive examples of OECMs.



A silvopastoral system in Colombia. Photo: Andres Estefan



Birds soar over a
flooded rice field in
California
Photo: Ash Ponders

Rice wetlands as habitat

The Central Valley of the U.S. state of California is a major agricultural region, and an important stopover and wintering area for migratory birds. In the 19th century, agricultural fields replaced the wetlands and riparian forests that served as habitat for a multitude of species, leading to significant biodiversity loss. In recent decades, conservationists partnered with rice farmers to reverse this trend by flooding rice fields during a critical overwintering period for migrating birds, and more recently adapted flooding practices to include variable water depths during other periods of habitat deficits to support a greater number of species. In some cases,

to enhance seasonal flooding, artificial islands for nesting are installed. The results on farms that manage flooding to accommodate migrating birds have been striking: up to 230 species of animals have been recorded, including 187 bird species (28 of which are endangered, threatened, or of conservation concern). A complementary approach is being adopted on farms in Colombia, where periodic rotations of flooded rice fields, interspersed with sugarcane crops, create artificial wetlands for migratory shorebirds while increasing farm productivity. Farms that are managed to create artificial habitat, permanent or seasonal, with a clear long-term conservation outcomes for migratory species, may be strong examples of OECMs.



Floodplain tree planting
along the Mississippi River.
Photo: Dale Gentry

Bird-friendly forest management

By keeping forests as forests and managing them to enhancing wildlife habitat, working forest lands are a key strategy in meeting 30x30 goals. Across the United States, foresters are adopting bird-friendly forestry practices that create or improve habitat for priority birds and other wildlife, intentionally maintaining structural complexity and improving forest resilience to climate change. Audubon's [Forester Training and Endorsement Program](#) trains and recognizes foresters for using the best available science to implement healthy forest

management practices that create or improve these habitats. Similar approaches apply to non-timber forest products. Maple producers, a specialization only found in North America, can enroll in a voluntary [Bird-Friendly Maple](#) program and agree to implement practices to improve habitat for birds, as well as overall forest health. Targeting working forest technical and financial assistance in areas anchored by Protected Areas can maximize conservation benefits. Working forests that have adopted and implemented bird-friendly forestry practices may be considered OECMs.

Previous policy briefs: We invite you to read previous policy brief on [Indigenous-led protected areas](#).

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