



May 9, 2023

**Keynote for the Corridors, Connectivity and Crossings Conference, Tucson, Arizona**

*Under Secretary Robert Bonnie, Farm Production and Conservation, USDA*

We're here to talk about connectivity, corridors, and crossings. This is an important and timely discussion to the Biden Administration. Two years ago, we committed to action on wildlife corridors through America the Beautiful. Two months ago, the Council on Environmental Quality instructed all federal agencies to integrate connectivity into their work.

Marking that occasion, the President himself stated, "whether it's the National Park Service or the Bureau of Land Management or the Forest Service or private landowners, we need to be coordinated to make sure we are conserving habitats along migration routes, no matter where or who's in charge of that land."

It helps enormously that we have new resources for conservation through BIL and IRA. Given the groundswell in executive and legislative actions at the federal and state levels that are prioritizing work on connectivity, corridors, and crossings, we have a generational opportunity.

This growing interest in connectivity and corridors grew out of millennia of indigenous knowledge, and decades of western science, which tell us that most species need to move seasonally to find food, shelter and mates. Over many generations, species also need to move to find refuge from a changing climate.

When I was 7, my family and I took a pack trip into the Custer NF and witnessed a herd of elk above the tree line. I remember being told then that, come fall, those elk would be in the valleys below. At that age, I was already well aware that robins and other birds migrated. But these were elk which seemed like an altogether different and more magical thing.

In the intervening years, advances in the science of migration have led us to the inflection point we're at today. Animal tracking and remote sensing have driven rapid expansion of our knowledge. It's one thing when you tell political leaders that corridors are important. It's another when you show them exactly where they are and what threatens them. The maps dare us NOT to take action.

That's where we are now in the story of migratory big game in the West, a story written by many of you in this room. You have shown us the specific needs of hundreds of herds of mule deer, pronghorn, elk, sheep, moose and bison, and how they struggle with all that we put in their way. And how we respond, I think, shows us how we can approach connectivity more broadly.

-----

When I think of migratory big game in the West, and the scale of the policy and

management implications, I think of Yellowstone. There, the new science is exposing shortcomings in conservation policy while also simultaneously rallying new coalitions to fix them.

When Yellowstone National Park was established in 1872, it was a 2-million-acre box on the map. It was almost immediately clear that the park was too small to protect wildlife. So over the following century, federal, state and tribal leaders added new land to encompass millions more acres.

In the second half of the 20th Century, public values broadened further. The fields of ecology and conservation biology came into their own and viewed national parks as “islands” that would lose species over time unless they were effectively enlarged. Conservationists began to talk of a “Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem” where coordinated management was needed across some 15 million acres of parks and national forests to recover a species like the grizzly bear.

The story of migratory big game is now showing us, even that’s not enough! We see that hundreds of pronghorn travel 120 miles from Grand Teton National Park to working lands around Pinedale, Wyoming. We see that hundreds of mule deer go the other way, from Teton Park over to the Wind River Reservation. We see that thousands of deer travel 150 miles from wilderness areas on the Bridger Teton National Forest to working lands around Rock Springs, Wyoming. Overall, in the Yellowstone Ecosystem alone, 6 species migrate twice a year, gaining fat in the high country and growing their numbers to fuel biodiversity, local economies, and a whole western way of life.

All this depends not only on 15 million acres of public land, but about 6 million of private and 2 million of tribal land. Even in one of the most protected landscapes, public lands aren’t enough.

Public land acquisition, while important, won’t solve the problem – we can never buy every acre we need and doing so mobilizes strong opposition. It’s also unnecessary – landowners are willing to conserve habitat if given the right incentives. When I first came to Washington, there were Congressional bills to regulate lands outside the Park. That too won’t work. The old model – one largely focused on land acquisition, on regulation – on government as dictator not partner – on conservation from afar – won’t solve the problem.

Instead, we need strategies that work with not against private landowners and tribes – that seek to leverage landowners’ and tribes’ stewardship ethic while finding ways to integrate conservation into working lands. Conservation is a team game.

This new model of conservation has been emerging for some time. It recognizes the importance of working with people to conserve land in a voluntary and incentive-based manner. Over the last several decades, we have developed new tools to protect working lands from development, and help manage them in ways that benefit the environment. But the truth is, we’ve struggled to build the policy, financial, and human infrastructure necessary to deliver this new model of conservation at meaningful scales.

That’s what we are working on every day at USDA. And with all of you, we’ve made some

progress. Many of you may be familiar with our work on the Sage Grouse. Through NRCS' Sage Grouse Initiative, we worked with state and local partners to design an approach to conserve the sage grouse while keeping working lands working. Many of you know the tag line: "what's good for the bird is good for the herd." Over 13 years, NRCS invested \$620 million across 9.7 million acres of rangelands:

- 800,000 acres of perpetual conservation easements.
- A conservation footprint larger than 4 Yellowstone NPs.
- 2,813 participating ranchers.

-----

Early in this Administration, we began to look for opportunities to help conserve wildlife corridors and habitats building on the lessons of SGI. SGI had already provided co-benefits for migratory big game across tens of thousands of acres. But we knew we could do more.

We were impressed with what the Department of Interior has started during the Trump Administration, through SO 3362 and the good work of Casey Stemler who is here today.

In Wyoming, we saw a state full of scientists like Matt Kauffman and Hall Sawyer who'd pioneered research on migratory big game. Photographers like Joe Riis bringing communities into the story. Locals volunteering their weekend time to take down poorly-constructed fences. A Game and Fish Department and a Governor standing up a local process to set priorities. And so a year ago, we partnered with Wyoming to launch a pilot project to see how we could adapt Farm Bill conservation programs to migratory big game.

But first, we did a lot of listening – we sat down with Governor Gordon and his team. We traveled to Pinedale and Cody and met with folks there. This helped us identify shared goals and resources that Secretary Vilsack and Governor Gordon articulated in an MOU to chart our course. In parallel, after we visited them last May in Fort Washakie, the Wind River Intertribal Council voted unanimously to partner with USDA. Together we have adopted 5 initial geographic priority areas around the state.

We found we needed to build in flexibility. Species, herds, and landscapes vary in their needs and threats. Landowners vary in their management goals, financial capacity, and planning horizon. So we committed to combine three sets of tools: 1) land restoration and management drawing heavily on NRCS' Environmental Quality Incentives Program; 2) long-term stewardship drawing heavily on FSA's Grassland Conservation Reserve Program to develop a conservation lease; and 3) agricultural land protection drawing heavily on NRCS' Agricultural Conservation Easement Program. Across these we have a diverse portfolio of short, medium, and long-term solutions for landowners and tribal partners in these key wildlife habitats. To date we have committed \$21 million new ACEP and EQIP resources to Wyoming under the migratory big game pilot.

Our programs aren't perfect, and could work better together – so we are making improvements. We'll continue to refine habitat leasing. We are also working with the state

to utilize our CREP program, which can fund additional management activities, and leverage partner dollars. Recently, FSA has improved the accessibility of CRP and CREP on tribal lands, which has significant implications for tribal partners.

More broadly, NRCS is working to improve the implementation of its Farm Bill conservation programs. In the coming days, you will see efforts to reduce red tape in both our easement and RCPP programs with other changes coming over the coming months.

These changes will help us implement \$19.5 billion in new dollars for NRCS programs in the IRA targeted to climate mitigation. Fortunately, many of the practices that benefit the climate – such as rangeland and forest restoration – can also benefit wildlife connectivity.

We also heard, loud and clear, that we cannot succeed without new personnel capacity. In Wyoming, our first steps have been to create a new migratory big game coordinator position and 4 new field positions in NRCS Wyoming. Foundations are stepping forward, too. Some, like the Knobloch Family Foundation, have been at it for years. Others, including Hewlett, BAND, and Wilburforce Foundations, have stepped in this year to establish a \$1.5 million pooled fund that partners can access to support new conservation positions.

We also heard the need for science to target programs and measure outcomes. So USDA has invested, so far, more than \$1 million into natural and social science research capacity at University of Wyoming. This includes research to understand everything from wildlife friendly fence design to factors that influence landowner participation in voluntary conservation programs in corridors.

We are working closely with our colleagues in the USDA Forest Service and over in the Department of Interior to align our efforts, and you'll hear later today from two good friends – Deputy Undersecretary for NRE (FS) Meryl Harrell and Deputy Secretary Beaudreau – about some of the opportunities they are working on.

At USDA, we're looking for ways to further institutionalize the New Model of conservation. We are looking at how to strengthen and expand NRCS' Working Lands for Wildlife Program. These are the folks responsible for the Sage Grouse Initiative, the migratory big game pilot, and other initiatives in the East like Longleaf Pine. One recent WLFW innovation is the Frameworks for Conservation Action, piloted in the Sagebrush and Great Plains Grasslands Biomes. These Frameworks show partners how they can combine Farm Bill programs to target conservation across large geographies. We want to replicate these for additional priorities. Importantly, we want to add FSA and the Conservation Reserve Program. As we do, we think we can make multi-year commitments to back Frameworks with new Farm Bill and IRA resources. You can expect to hear more on this later in the year. All of you are key partners and we hope you will engage with our team, your NRCS State Conservationists and your FSA State Executive Directors.

-----

I noted in my opening how science and maps have changed the conversation on corridors and connectivity. And how maps can force action. Yet, all of us are also aware that maps can create challenges – particularly for landowners or others who see the potential of those

maps to affect their livelihoods or just to bring unwanted scrutiny.

But, what if those maps were viewed instead by farmers, ranchers, forest owners, tribes, Governors, and others as opportunities. What if being inside the lines meant more opportunity for resources, help, conservation assistance, ranching assistance, or just recognition.

And, this is the promise of the new model of conservation. We've been fighting about wildlife for years. And, I'm not suggesting that the new model will do away with all conflicts or the need for all regulation. But, it does have the potential to dramatically reduce conflicts and improve prospects for wildlife. And, it has the possibility to reduce the polarization around natural resource issues that has often made conservation far harder.

Conserving the wildlife that migrate forces us to work across boundaries – property boundaries, stakeholder boundaries and political boundaries. And, in so doing, conservation of corridors may speed the adoption of an approach which simultaneously draws broad, bipartisan public support and is more effective.