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## **Preamble**

The purpose of the JV8 Central Grasslands Conservation Initiative (JV8) Implementation Strategy is to provide a planning tool to allow the eight Migratory Bird Joint Ventures in the Central Grasslands and their partners to collaborate on grassland and grassland bird conservation across the North American central grasslands region. This collaboration is distinguished by having a strong focus on on-the-ground conservation actions. The metrics to evaluate success build off the Joint Venture Implementation Plans (habitat quantity and quality as well as target species population trends). The primary research questions embedded within this strategy are focused on understanding the effectiveness of conservation actions and using the best science available and the principles of adaptive management to refine these practices. Implementation will be carried out by each of the 8 Joint Ventures that reflect current best practices while allowing for the geographic differences related to legislative background (particularly the legal framework across the 3 countries – but also States/Provinces), climate, vegetation (particularly grassland type), and the distribution and migratory patterns of the target grassland birds species.

Joint Ventures are trusted partnerships with a wealth of experience and expertise in grassland conservation. They respond to key threats to habitat and species and build on their history of implementing conservation actions to conserve wetlands and wetland birds. This JV8 strategy guides the expansion of these efforts on grasslands and promotes shared experience and best practices between the 8 Joint Ventures and their partners to halt, and ultimately reverse, the decline of priority grassland bird species. Phase 1 of the JV8 strategy was a [Grassland Assessment](#) published in 2019. This assessment showed only 21% of grasslands within the 900-million-acre central grassland biome has not been ploughed – and only 4% of this land was formally protected. Incorporating current best land practices to conserve grasslands and grassland birds goes hand-in-hand with building a resilient ranching economy recognizing the importance of grazing to maintain grassland habitat.

This strategy also points to other, more global, benefits provided through the on-the-ground efforts to conserve grasslands including carbon sequestration, pollinators, and other benefits related to soil and water conservation. These efforts will provide for longer-term resiliency that not only include the agricultural economy and benefits for wildlife, but also wider benefits from these ecosystem services. The strategy focuses on tried and tested conservation approaches that Joint Ventures have adopted while at the same time exploring more novel actions that will drive success.

To be transformative the JV8 Initiative must be a long-term commitment for grassland and grassland bird conservation. There are factors that will impact the economics of grassland use over time, and these will require an adaptive approach. To counter the current rates of loss of unploughed grasslands and associated grassland species, the conservation community must bring substantial resources and significantly scale up conservation actions. Policy changes, marketing, and fund-raising to support this massive increase in grassland conservation efforts is required.

In 1989 the North American Wetlands Conservation Act was signed into law and was a huge impetus for the conservation of wetlands and wetland birds. Over the last 40+ years the Act has provided \$1.2 billion for wetland conservation. Including non-federal matching dollars, the conservation community has delivered over \$6 billion of conservation action focused on wetlands. Migratory Bird Joint Venture partnerships play a leading role in both implementation and leveraging of additional funds in support of this effort for wetlands and wetland birds. The success of this work can be seen in the dramatic recovery

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of wetland bird populations during this 40+-year time period. A similar level of effort and funding is needed to accelerate conservation in the 900 million acres (364 million hectares) of the central grassland biome stretching from Canada to Mexico, and to stabilize and ultimately recover populations of grassland birds that have been in steep decline for the last 50 years.

### **Introduction**

Through the eight Migratory Bird Joint Ventures — representing over 72 federal, state, provincial, non-profit, academic and industry conservation partners — JV8 is collaborating to stem central grassland losses and the negative impacts to grassland birds. The Joint Ventures are working together across the breeding, migration, and wintering habitats occupied by grassland dependent birds throughout their annual cycle in Mexico, the USA and Canada.

#### JV8 Vision

**The Central Grasslands from Canada to Mexico support stable, thriving, and diverse communities of birds, other wildlife, and people into the future.**

#### JV8 Mission

**The JV8 Central Grasslands Conservation Initiative engages and expands Migratory Bird Joint Venture partnerships across North America for the stewardship of native grassland ecosystems.**

JV8 efforts to elevate conservation in the grasslands of North America builds off of, and incorporates lessons learned from, current and prior efforts to deliver conservation for the central grasslands of North America. The work of the JV8 is guided by national and international bird conservation plans, including the [Partners in Flight Landbird Conservation Plan](#), the [North American Waterfowl Management Plan](#), the [U.S. Shorebird Conservation Initiative](#), and the [Waterbird Conservation Plan for the Americas](#)

The work of JV8 builds off, and learns from, a long history of regional grassland-focused initiatives including those of the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC), World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the Nature Conservancy (TNC) and many others including government agencies actions and policies. We will reflect on lessons learned to ensure we adopt best practices from these endeavors.

There is also a global focus on temperate grassland; the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has described temperate grasslands as the most endangered habitat on earth. This resulted in the [Hohhot Declaration](#) in 2008, highlighting the global plight of temperate grasslands and ratified by representatives of Mexico, USA, and Canada. In addition, there is an on-going, international initiative to garner support for a declaration of an International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists by the United Nations.

The [Central Grasslands Roadmap](#) represents an ongoing initiative that highlights the continental-scale need for conservation of grassland birds and incorporates multiple partners. JV8 is collaborating closely with the Roadmap Initiative to ensure synergy between both approaches. There is strong alignment with Joint Ventures being positioned to deliver the Roadmap's recommended actions on the ground.

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While the individual Joint Ventures continue to focus on their regional priorities for grassland conservation and land use, including grassland bird-specific action plans, JV8 seeks to raise the profile of their collective achievements, develop cross-learning tools, and leverage these efforts to attract significantly greater support for Joint Venture work.

This strategy focuses on activities over the next 3 years (mid-2021 to mid-2024).

### **JV8 Foundational values**

JV8 respects and honors diverse voices, including diverse cultural values, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, and generations of experience of private landowners, ejidos, and Indigenous/First Nation communities. We value the knowledge and experience of all stakeholders and recognize the importance of working directly with those whose livelihoods depend on grasslands, and who are the primary stewards of these lands.

A key principle of JV8 is to keep people on the landscape. This is both a principle of engagement and practical. The JV9 Grassland Assessment showed that a large proportion of undisturbed grassland is on private and tribal lands. The Joint Ventures have a long history of active engagement and strong relationships with private landowners. Finding win-win solutions with these and other land stewards will be an effective strategy for both conserving grasslands and associated birds, but also human livelihoods. As we build resilience in grasslands, we must ensure a thriving ranching industry and resist the conversion of grasslands either to monoculture agriculture or to urban/industrial development.

### **The JV8 strategic elements**

The prime elements of this strategy are **1) Build a conservation synopsis of the Central Grasslands; 2) Accelerate successful conservation actions; 3) Promote and fundraise for grassland and grassland bird conservation; 4) Identify legislative policy and donor priorities that support changes which advance grassland and grassland bird conservation; 5) Promote applied research to answer key questions to optimize conservation actions; and 6) Support innovations and new initiatives.**

#### **1. Build a Conservation Synopsis of the Central Grasslands**

The JV8 'Conservation Synopsis' unites the conservation targets (and metrics), direct and indirect threats, opportunities, and integrated delivery of conservation actions across the geographic extent of JV8. It builds on the Grassland Assessment which highlighted the rate of loss of unploughed grassland. This synopsis highlights key bird species, their habitat needs, and regionally-specific approaches to conserving the grasslands upon which they depend. We adopt standard descriptors to ensure harmony and clarity on our collective conservation efforts.

##### *1.1 Internal prioritization*

To summarize current Joint Venture grassland conservation activities, JV8 will coordinate a series of internal workshops and collaborative exercises to outline the types and regional prioritization of conservation actions that we will apply based on experience of what works best.

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### Actions

- Complete a concise conservation synopsis of the JV8 geography. This will guide program development as well as provide the narrative and logic as JV8 markets its collective conservation effort.
- Conduct a gap analysis to identify conservation actions that require expanded and novel approaches from Joint Ventures and their partners. This will highlight where Joint Venture efforts would yield the most success and avoid overlap with existing conservation work being conducted by partners. This will directly inform a model for growth.

### Metrics

- Complete a short history of past conservation actions in the central grasslands and important pieces of legislative and other direct support while reflecting on key lessons learned.
- Complete a narrative that encapsulates the entire connected biome with rated threats and ranked conservation actions. Include threat maps to guide activity across the central grasslands and maximize conservation success. These outputs will assist with JV8 outreach and marketing (see next section).

## **2. Accelerate successful conservation actions**

Despite the current levels of resources being applied to grassland conservation and the substantial role that Joint Ventures play in conservation delivery in the central grasslands, the challenge is to significantly increase the pace and scale of overall conservation efforts and capacity. This is needed to address the scale of existing threats, retain remaining grasslands, and restore degraded grasslands to stabilize and ultimately improve the status of grassland birds and other wildlife that share their habitats. JV8's role is to close the sizable resource gap that currently limits grassland conservation and to reverse current trends in grassland loss.

### *2.1 Build out conservation actions*

Increase JV8's conservation footprint through collaboration, development, sharing of data and acceleration of recommended practices and engage conservation partners and grassland/rangeland stewards to maximize return on investment.

### Actions

- Expand and replicate efforts through application of best practices based on a landscape-level social-biological analysis of threats and opportunities for grassland conservation.
- Establish cross-learning workshops, data sharing platforms and collaborations including multi-Joint Venture proposals and programs that address shared threats to grasslands and implement similar conservation actions.

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### Metrics

- Developed measures of conservation success on the ground that can be applied across JV8 and track increased resources corresponding to proposed accelerated conservation actions.

### *2.2 Develop measures of conservation success*

Collaborate with the Central Grassland Roadmap and other partners to establish long-term conservation metrics to serve as indicators of success across the grassland biome and as a key reporting tool to highlight the impact of JV8 efforts.

### Actions

- Develop a system of measurement of conservation success for Joint Venture efforts that use a standard reporting structure/database. This allows JV8 to annually measure progress. This will include grassland bird species population targets as well as measures of land area protected, restored, and enhanced.
- Develop socio-economic measures to track effectiveness in supporting key stakeholders on the land as critical partners in this effort and the principal agents of change.

### Metric

- Standardized but simple reporting metrics that specifically relate to grassland conservation adopted by Joint Ventures and harmonized with those developed by the Central Grasslands Roadmap.

## **3. Promote and fundraise for grassland and grassland bird conservation**

The central grasslands of North America are receiving increasing attention as a result of well-documented grassland loss and declines in grassland-dependent species. Public support for conservation is stronger than ever and the central grasslands have iconic status in North America. This provides an opportunity for JV8 to drive increasing support for conservation of the central grasslands from developing an outreach plan to marketing and fundraising efforts.

### *3.1 Outreach*

As part of the outreach plan, we will highlight the plight of grasslands and our collective conservation approach as part of the solution. We will emphasize that it is not a hopeless situation. Reversing grassland loss is a large undertaking, but it can be achieved over time, as shown by the conservation successes Joint Venture partners have achieved for waterfowl and their habitats.

### Actions

- Create awareness of JV8 by representing the Joint Venture partnerships and their grassland conservation work at meetings at the regional, national, and international level.

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- Promote conservation of the central grasslands to drive increased public support for grassland conservation, donor assistance, and supporting legislation. This includes outreach and marketing for JV8 using approaches such as direct outreach, online tools, publications, and other media. This will be based on understanding of key audiences utilizing social sciences. The primary aim of this effort is to garner more support for JV8 from key audiences, from private landowners and rural and indigenous communities to large corporations, foundations, and federal and multinational institutions.

### Metric

- Quantify reach to target audiences by tracking understanding of the plight of the central grasslands and understanding of Joint Ventures' and JV8's role to help us refine outreach and marketing approaches to ensure we gain maximum support for our efforts.

### *3.2 Marketing and Fundraising*

JV8 will seek increased financial and technical support to implement priority conservation actions across the JV8 geography at multiple scales, from regional to state to national to international.

### Actions

- Develop a fundraising strategy to bridge the gap between current and desired funding. This will be both realistic, justifiable, and ambitious. Messages will be tailored to different audiences to emphasize the importance of healthy ecosystems, the importance of the stewardship of those who live and recreate on the land, and the intrinsic values of, and threats to, native flora and fauna.
- Work closely with large foundations on developing their internal funding priorities by highlighting the importance of grassland conservation.

### Metrics

- Track fundraising success for JV8-led grassland conservation and monitor overall level of support received by other partners complementing our efforts.
- Track the evolution of donor strategies that support grassland conservation and assess JV8 role in guiding these donors.

### *3.3 Reinforce connections across traditional and administrative borders*

JV8 is a trans-boundary, multinational effort focused on the central grasslands that spans 3 countries, includes many tribal nations, overlaps at least 25 state and provincial entities, and is influenced by thousands of local decision-making bodies (counties, cities, *ejidos*, etc.) that all can play a major role in grassland management policy. This is a strength of the program but demands that we are mindful about equity and inclusion and acknowledge the legal, linguistic, and cultural differences across the region in

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all of JV8's planning, communication, and on-the-ground activities as we develop our outreach materials.

### Actions

- Inform, update, and enhance collaboration with tribal nations, and Canadian, United States, and Mexican provincial, federal, provincial, and state agencies on JV8 activities and accomplishments.
- Participate in transboundary discussions to seek opportunities to advise government agencies in their efforts to meet national and international conservation targets.
- Promote cross-border collaboration and support for systematically marginalized populations.

### Metrics

- Track JV8 engagement in multinational collaborative discussions.
- Track funding that results from transboundary collaboration.

#### **4. Identify legislative policy and donor priorities that support changes which advance grassland and grassland bird conservation**

Legislative actions at the national and state/provincial levels and major donor priorities will be a prime source of increased support for grassland conservation. JV8 will identify and support clear policy targets and legislative initiatives that advance our grassland conservation goals. We will add our expert voice in highlighting the plight of grassland birds and the need for greater resources required for their successful conservation.

##### *4.1 Building on successful policies for grassland and grassland bird conservation*

The policy efforts that have worked best in the past can set a path to influence future policy development.

### Action

- Analyze the history of agricultural, development, and conservation policies that impact grasslands and grassland birds, which conservation policies have had the most success, and why, as well as barriers to success.

### Metric

- Produce a summary of lessons learned from past policy efforts and develop guidance for best practices that will allow JV8 to inform policy development that provides for long-term conservation of grasslands.

*4.2 Encourage positive policy changes*

We will play a key role in applying our expertise towards educating policy makers and informing initiatives to support policy change across the JV8 geography in support of grasslands and grassland bird conservation.

Actions

- Prioritize and inform legislative efforts by lending our expert voice and working through partners with policy experience. Elevate our work with key legislators through the support of [The Association of Joint Venture Management Boards](#) and through our individual JV Management Boards.
- Inform and expand on non-governmental donor policy in support of grassland and grassland bird conservation.
- Support deeper transboundary collaboration and explore opportunities that international partnerships can promote including policies for dedicated funding and support for transboundary exchange and capacity building.

Metrics

- Track new legislation in support of grassland conservation and assess JV8 role in shaping this legislation.
- Maintain a record of JV8-related inputs to policy discussions.

**5. Promote applied research to answer key questions to optimize conservation actions**

Encourage applied research in support of priority JV8 conservation actions, including studies of emerging threats and opportunities, grassland ecology, bird demographics, and effectiveness of conservation actions. We will include social science and economic research to support our efforts, particularly as this relates to the role of land stewards and rural communities. We will continue to support the Central Grasslands Roadmap in highlighting applied research questions and facilitating research efforts.

*5.1 Applied Research*

Work with researchers to evaluate the effectiveness of conservation activities in an adaptive management framework.



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### Actions

- Engage the research community in evaluating the effectiveness of existing conservation actions and evaluating new approaches to grassland and grassland bird conservation. Consider opportunities for coordinated multi-Joint Venture research efforts to inform conservation activity.
- Share results of relevant research and evaluation efforts among the JV8 partnership and with a wider audience by contributing to peer-reviewed publications.
- Promote coordinated bird monitoring efforts across Joint Ventures and use the Avian Knowledge Network to manage and share data.

### Metrics

- Monitor and report JV8's impact in directing applied research to fill in knowledge gaps.
- Track that Joint Ventures are using standard protocols (including [The Avian Knowledge Network](#)) to collect and share bird monitoring data.

### *5.2 Analyze and respond to emerging threats*

JV8 will monitor and adapt to the dynamic changes resulting in new or increased stressors and threats to the central grassland ecosystems – climate change, changing human settlement patterns, energy infrastructure, changing market demands, the emergence of new crops, and the increased use of (and novel) pesticides – and more.

### Actions

- Work with partners to anticipate and assess threats related to dynamic changes in the landscape and grassland ecosystems to ensure that we adapt our conservation strategies and approaches in response.

### Metric

- Track JV8 programmatic evolution responding to projected dynamic changes.

## **6. Support innovation and new initiatives**

JV8 will explore opportunities to develop new approaches to conservation relative to healthy, functional grassland ecosystems. The partnership will explore and direct support to conservation priorities and actions where they are most needed.

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### 6.1 New approaches to grassland and grassland bird conservation

We will investigate opportunities to increase awareness about the benefits of healthy, functional ecosystems resulting from grassland stewardship, conservation, and restoration to build support for Joint Venture efforts. These may include carbon capture, pollinators, water quality and quantity, and soil conservation values. Increased appreciation and understanding of the benefits of healthy, functional ecosystems and responsible stewardship can potentially result in support for conservation activities on public, private, and tribal or communally-owned (e.g., by *ejidos* in Mexico) grasslands. We will look for ways to support new opportunities and improve adoption of existing options that could yield measurable conservation benefits, for example reintroduction of keystone native species, sustainable or regenerative agriculture, tourism, conservation incentives, and new and/or innovative approaches to rangeland management.

#### Actions

- Explore opportunities to support sustainable agricultural production and certification, tourism, conservation incentives and innovative approaches to rangeland management that yield measurable conservation benefits.
- Play a key role in exploring and developing innovative approaches to grassland and grassland bird conservation through a combination of expanded partnerships, promoting novel research, and soliciting consultant input.
- Coordinate with national livestock groups to support the transfer of new and innovative programs to ensure exposure and adoption by target audiences.

#### Metric

- Document the ways JV8 involvement helps support the adoption of innovative approaches to grassland and grassland bird conservation by Joint Ventures and others.

### **Conclusion**

JV8 is an ambitious initiative with the goal of conserving the iconic landscape and wildlife of the central grasslands of North America while supporting the ecosystem stewardship and livelihoods of the people who live there. JV8 is ready to deliver on its conservation goals and will only be constrained by the limitations of resources the Joint Venture network can bring to bear in this effort. The JV8 is committed to moving forward following the principles and approaches of adaptive management as laid out to achieve our Vision. Since conservation requires continuous attention to ever-changing threats, the JV8 is committed to adapt and evolve over time to meet these challenges.

The JV8 challenge is to bridge the gap between what we can currently do and what is needed to reverse the declines in grassland birds. It is a considerable and costly endeavor, but this Strategy is our guiding document. We are ready for the challenge.