

MATADOR RANCH – PHILLIPS COUNTY, MT

Ownership Type	Grassbank consists of TNC-owned land and leased allotments
Size	60,000 acres: ~ 50% private, 50% federal and state leases
Primary Goals	Landscape scale conservation of rare wildlife; prevention of weeds and sodbusting
Activity Status	Currently active, but in need of supplemental funding to continue operations
Contact	Linda Poole, The Nature Conservancy

Grassbank Description

The Nature Conservancy purchased the 60,000 acre Matador Ranch in 2000 with the goal of conserving native prairie wildlife across 2.5 million acres of the Glaciated Plains. Targeted species included prairie dogs, black-footed ferrets, burrowing owls, swift fox, ferruginous hawks, sage grouse and grassland birds. These species require vast expanses of native prairie grasslands and shrub steppe to thrive. In 2003, a strategic assessment of conservation needs and opportunities led the Conservancy to initiate operating the Matador Ranch as a grassbank to foster protection of quality habitat both on the ranch and throughout the larger landscape. Currently thirteen local ranchers graze their cattle on the Matador. They pay full market value for the forage (\$17.50 per AUM), minus the value of conservation discounts they accrue by management of their home ranches. All lessees refrain from sodbusting and commit to monitoring, control and prevention of noxious weeds during the lease period. They receive additional discounts for providing habitat for prairie dogs and sage grouse. Ranches that are certified as sustainable stewards through Montana State University's Undaunted Stewardship Program receive further discounts. In 2003, the grassbank fostered direct conservation across 296,000 acres.

Stakeholders / Collaborating Parties

- **Government**
 - BLM
 - Montana Division of State Lands and Division of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
- **Non-profit**
 - The Nature Conservancy
- **Private**
 - Neighboring ranchers with grassbank leases, known as the Matador Grazing Group
- **Universities**
 - Montana State University

Primary Benefits

- **Protection of Biodiversity**
 - Habitat protection for black-tailed prairie dogs, sage grouse and other native wildlife
 - Protection from conversion of native prairie to agricultural cropping practices (sodbusting)
- **Rangeland Health**
 - Reduction of threat of invasive weeds
 - Provides incentive for long-term monitoring and sustainable management of ranches
 - Exposes lessees to alternative grazing practices geared to enhancing biodiversity
- **Community Engagement and Goodwill**
 - Grassbank partnerships opened the door for development of community-driven conservation plan for rare wildlife and other natural resources spanning more than a million acres

Major Challenges

Continued operation of this grassbank hinges on quickly retiring several million dollars of land debt, and securing funds to cover annual revenue losses of roughly \$70,000 due to grassbank operations. Other challenges include developing equitable values for conservation discounts, and effectively managing large herds of mixed-ownership cattle that are being run in common.