Forest Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Outreach of Interest (OOI) Announcement
INSTRUCTIONS

Grassland Ecological Potential and Restoration Effectiveness Evaluation

SUMMARY INFORMATION

Federal Award Agency Name: U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service

Funding Opportunity Title: Grassland Ecological Potential and Restoration Effectiveness Evaluation

Opportunity Number: USDA-FS-R13-2024-24-25-RM

Assistance Listing Number: 10.699 Partnership Agreement Outreach

Funding Instrument Type: Other

Key Points

- OOI response deadline: **February 7, 2025; 10:00 PM Eastern Standard Time (EST)**.
- USDA Forest Service will send an auto-response upon receipt of your application submission.
- USDA Forest Service will send each applicant a follow-up message within one month of application receipt.
- Contact us: opega@usda.gov.

✓ **Please ensure that when you complete your forms for this proposal (SF-424, Narrative Statement…etc.) that you "Save As" and give your file a new name. DO NOT "Print to PDF". Once you have saved your forms under a new name, you will upload those forms into the attachment document.**

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I. Request for Proposal Overview

A. Objective

This Outreach of Interest (OOI) functions as an outreach mechanism to cultivate relationships and connect with potential partners. This OOI is intended to solicit responses to explore future projects meeting the needs and interests of potential partners through partnership agreements within legislative authority with USDA Forest Service.

USDA Forest Service is looking to enhance knowledge about grassland communities, their ecological potential and improve understanding of restoration approaches and their effectiveness. This initiative aims to explore partnerships focused on grassland ecosystems while increasing awareness of their importance. New partnerships can help leverage existing ecological classification systems (e.g., ecological sites, disturbance response groups, etc.) and monitoring methodologies to develop streamlined approaches that can be used to:

- determine ecological potential across the national grasslands.
- determine grassland resiliency and restoration effectiveness.

Your submission signals an opportunity for USDA Forest Service to connect with you to explore your ideas/projects/programs and how they may align with federal funding opportunities. USDA Forest Service is committed to fostering strong, collaborative partnerships. These collaborations are vital for increasing understanding of the ecological potential across the national grasslands, national tallgrass prairie and associated restoration needs/opportunities, expanding capacity, and ensuring resilient and healthy grassland ecosystems. By working together, all stakeholders can maximize the impact of restoration efforts on the national grasslands and national tallgrass prairie.

B. Funding

This OOI is non-funded and non-competitive. The intent of this OOI is to gauge your interest, feedback and/or your proposed projects ideas and concepts.

II. Agency Overview

A. Background

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service delivers world-class science, technology, and land management to sustain the Nation's forests and grasslands in collaboration with communities and our partners. USDA Forest Service manages 193 million acres of land, including 154 national forests, 20 national grasslands, 1 national tallgrass prairie, 7 research stations, and 81 experimental forests and ranges, as well as other special areas, in support of its' mission "to sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations."

As the lead federal agency in natural resource conservation, USDA Forest Service provides leadership in the protection, management, and use of the nation's forest, rangeland, and aquatic ecosystems. Through implementation of land and resource management plans, the agency ensures sustainable ecosystems by restoring and maintaining species diversity and ecological productivity that helps provide recreation, water, timber, minerals, fish, wildlife, wilderness, and aesthetic values for current and future generations of people. As a values-based, purpose driven and relationship-focused organization, USDA Forest Service emphasizes

working in collaboration with communities and our partners; providing access to resources and experiences that promote economic, ecological, and social vitality; connecting people to the land and one another; and delivering world-class science, technology, and land management. USDA Forest Service believes in service — to each other and the planet; the interdependency of people and nature; that conservation means we protect, preserve, and restore public lands for the people and enjoyment; that diversity is key—people and cultures, experiences, and ecosystems; and safety underpins everything we do.

B. Partnership Agreements with the USDA Forest Service

Partnership agreements are entered into in support of USDA Forest Service mission. The USDA Forest Service may approach or be approached by a potential partner to enter into a partnership agreement that results in a joint accomplishment of work benefiting both organizations. The principal purpose of partner agreements is the creation of partnerships in support of projects of mutual interest and mutual benefit to each party. Mutual interest exists when both parties benefit in the same qualitative way from the objectives of the agreement. If one party independently has an interest in a project that is shared by the other party, and both parties pool resources to obtain the result of the project, mutual interest exists. Most of FS authorities requires a mutual interest agreement.

Partnership agreements are considered non-assistance agreements and are not considered grants or cooperative agreements as those terms are used in the Federal Grants and Cooperative Agreements, 31U.S.C. 6301 et seq. USDA Forest Service engages partnership work through a range of legislative authorities (see Section IV, Legislative Authorities).

Award Procedures

The Forest Service has general authority to negotiate and enter into different types of partnership arrangements, including but not limited to Stand-Alone Agreements, or Master Agreements with tiered Supplemental Project Agreements (SPAs) or a combination thereof. Partnership agreements and their supporting documentation are both negotiated and drafted in collaboration with prospective partners prior to entering into a funding arrangement. Discussions cover at a minimum, the appropriate statutory authority; a description of the project, including methodology and technical specifications; contributions and the responsibilities of the parties; financial plan; the period of performance; monitoring and accomplishments reporting. Regardless of who initiates discussions, all elements of a project are subject to negotiation. Any party may terminate the agreement at any time.
Except for provisions necessary for legal compliance, all elements of a partnership agreement are subject to negotiation and modification. Both parties are expected to negotiate, resolve, and document differences in cost and/or proposed work in writing. None of the parties should perform work outside the scope of the existing instrument or in excess of the funding prior to the execution of a formal modification.

Project Length

Awards under this announcement are typically 1 to 5 years in length. Projects of greater complexity may be awarded for a longer period, not to exceed 5 years.

Cost Share Match Requirements and Match Reductions or Waivers

For partnership agreements, the partner's contribution should not be less than 20 percent of

the total project cost, unless allowable under a reduction or waiver (see below). The matching amount should be consistent and commensurate with the project scope, size, and/or benefits received. The partner may satisfy the matching requirement by providing cash, real or personal property, services, and/or in-kind contributions, such as volunteer labor. Cash and third-party in-kind matches must consist of eligible costs.

Cash match is from the applicant's budget, such as personnel salary, fringe benefits, travel, equipment, and supplies, or cash provided by another party. Source of cash match cannot be derived from another Federal award. Cash donated or provided to a cooperator, specifically for that project is an in-kind contribution.

In-Kind match is a non-cash contribution of value. A non-Federal entity's in-kind match must meet the following criteria:

- Are verifiable from the non-Federal entity's records;
- Are not included as contributions for any other Federal award;
- Are necessary and reasonable for accomplishment of project or program objectives;
- Are not paid by the Federal Government under another Federal award, except where the Federal statute authorizing a program specifically provides that Federal funds made available for such program can be applied to matching or cost-sharing requirements of other Federal programs;
- Are provided for in the approved budget when required by the Federal awarding agency; and
- Conform to the Forest Service handbook (FSH1509.11), manual (1580) and/or other applicable federal laws and regulations.

Supplemental Guidance for Match Waivers and Match Reduction: The Forest Service may reduce or waive the minimum 20 percent cooperator match requirement for a project that serves an underserved/disadvantaged community or is a tribal sovereign.

Indirect Cost

Indirect costs are approved for reimbursement or as a cost-share requirement and have an effective period applicable to the term of master and supplemental agreements. Expenses that are necessary for the operation of an organization, but not specifically identified with or traceable to a specific program or output, that is, not a direct cost but rather a cost distributed across many programs or outputs. Often referred to as "overhead," or in the Forest Service as "burden," indirect costs are incurred as part of general management and administrative support of an organization, and may include office and personnel expenses, computers, and utilities.

III. Initiative Overview and OOI Intent

A. Program Overview

Grasslands provide a myriad of benefits such as wildlife and plant habitat and open space, yet they are considered one of the most endangered ecosystems in the world. The loss of these ecosystems has broad impacts including marked declines in the native plants and animals that depend on them as well as the people and communities that rely on them for their work and enjoyment. There are several factors that have impacted the health of grassland ecosystems. Some contemporary ecological stressors include invasive and non-native species and woody plant encroachment. Some historic ecological stressors include cultivation, disruption of natural

disturbance processes, and development.

The National Forest System includes approximately 3.8 million acres of National Grasslands and National Tallgrass Prairie. Numerous vegetation management and restoration efforts have been undertaken. Knowledge of ecological potential is varied and information relative to restoration success and factors influencing success is lacking. USDA Forest Service is seeking partners interested in assisting with leveraging existing ecological classification systems (e.g., ecological sites, disturbance response groups, etc.), and monitoring approaches to:

- determine ecological potential across the National Grasslands.
- determine grassland resiliency and restoration effectiveness.

The intent of this work is to inform future prioritization of areas for restoration as well restoration approaches that might be used. This could ultimately enable USDA Forest Service to make informed decisions on how to maximize the conservation return on investments. Additional opportunities may include correlating restoration effectiveness with associated benefits (e.g., habitat improvement, grassland bird population stabilization/improvements, enhanced opportunities for carbon sequestration, improve pollinator habitat and numbers, etc.).

B. Statement of Work

The purpose of partnerships would be to enhance knowledge and understanding of ecological potential and associated restoration success and the factors that influence success.
This OOI is looking for interest in projects that will achieve the following objectives:

- Development of a streamlined approach(s) for determining differences in ecological potential of sites and what factors influence that potential.
    - Various ecological classification systems have been developed, but a cohesive and streamlined approach to leveraging those systems to readily determine ecological potential across landscapes has not been broadly applied. Partners would develop a streamlined approach that could be used to determine ecological potential across areas and aid in arriving at better informed and more strategic approaches to prioritizing areas for restoration.

- Development of a streamlined approach(s) for determining effectiveness of restoration activities and reasons for the level of effectiveness or lack thereof.
    - Evaluating restoration success is not straightforward. A variety of factors influence the level of success achieved and there is a diversity of approaches and perspectives on how best to evaluate success. There is an equally large variety of monitoring protocols that can be used to measure several ecological attributes. Understanding the effectiveness of restoration and the factors that affect it, especially at a landscape scale, is critical to ensuring lessons learned can used to benefit future projects and determine how to best address ongoing restoration needs. Partners would develop a streamlined approach to evaluating restoration success and determining the reasons for the level of effectiveness that could be consistently applied across landscapes.

- Collection of applicable monitoring data that would support the validation of the ecological potential and restoration effectiveness approaches.

- The USDA Forest Service does collect a variety of monitoring data, but the level of data collected prior to and following the implementation of restoration efforts is often limited due to staff time and resources. Potential partners would expand the capacity to collect information that would support the ecological potential and restoration effectiveness approaches. Partners would summarize the monitoring information along with copies of field collection datasheets or electronic versions.

USDA Forest Service will share information on past restoration projects as well as any existing monitoring data as requested to assist with these objectives.

IV. Legislative Authorities

USDA Forest Service engages partnership work through a range of Legislative Authorities.

- Cooperative Funds and Deposits Act of 1978, Public Law 94-148 as amended. 16 USC 565a-1
- Wyden Amendment (Public Law 105-277, Section 323 as amended by Public Law 109-54, Section 434, and permanently authorized by Public Law 111-11, Section 3001)
- Interior and Related Appropriations Act of 1992, Public Law 102-154
- Public Land Corps Healthy Forests Restoration Act, Public Law 109-154, 16 U.S.C. 1701 638 Tribal Forestry Protection Act, Title 2018 Farm Bill P.L. 115-334, Section 8703, 25 U.S.C. 3115.
- Stewardship End Result Contracting, Public Law 108-148 §604. 16 USC 6591c.
- Good Neighbor Authority; Agricultural Act of 2014, Pub. L. 113-79, section 8206 as amended, 16 USC 2113a
- Agriculture Conservation Experienced Service (ACES) Program, 2014 Farm Bill, Public Law 113-79, Section 8302
- Federal Technology Transfer Act of 1986, Public Law 96-480, 15 U.S.C. 3710a
- National Agricultural Research, Extension, and Teaching Policy Act of 1977, Public Law 95-113, 7 US Code 3318 and 3319a

V. How to Respond

A. Eligible Responders

Eligible applicants include for profit; non-profits; institutions of higher education; federal, state, local, and Native American tribal governments; foreign governments and organizations and special purpose districts (public utility districts, fire districts, conservation districts, school districts, and ports).

B. Content and Grants.gov Submission

- Submit SF 424, Narrative Statement form, and the attachment form through grants.gov or the opega@usda.gov Inbox. Submissions should be in .pdf or .doc format. **Section VI: Forms** section of this document includes forms for your use. For other feedback, use the grants.gov "attachments" form.
- Respond by: **February 7, 2025; 10:00 PM Eastern Standard Time (EST)**.
- Grants.gov submission is **preferred**. A grants.gov applicant account is required for submitting interest through grants.gov Home | Grants.gov. See Grants.gov

organization registration page for registration guidance.

Note: After registering, please choose "subscribe" in grants.gov. By subscribing to OOI Opportunity Number: USDA-FS-R13-2024-24-25-RM you will be notified of any updates and notifications.

Grants.gov provides customer support 24/7 via toll-free number **1-800-518-4726** and email at support@grants.gov. In addition, grants.gov has video tutorials available.

- Once registered in Grants.gov search for OOI Opportunity Number: USDA-FS-R13-2023-424-25-RM United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service.

  Note: System for Award Management (SAM) registration is required to submit any application across the federal government through grants.gov. SAM registration is a prerequisite to receiving any federal funding. SAM registration is a lengthy process. If you are not currently registered in SAM, we strongly recommend registration.

- No hardcopy applications will be accepted.
- For questions related to OOI opportunity: USDA-FS-R13-2024-24-25-RM, please contact USDA Forest Service: opega@usda.gov.

C. System for Award Management (SAM) registration

SAM.gov registration is required for submitting responses in SAM.gov (SAM.gov | Home), registration is free. The approval process for a new or renewal SAM registration can take several months. If you are awaiting SAM registration and cannot submit through grants.gov, please send your application to: opega@usda.gov.

VI. OOI Announcement

USDA Forest Service is committed to fostering strong, collaborative partnerships. These collaborations are vital for increasing understanding of the ecological potential across the national grasslands and national tallgrass prairie and associated restoration needs/opportunities, expanding capacity, and ensuring resilient and healthy grassland ecosystems. By working together, all stakeholders can maximize the impact of restoration efforts on the national grasslands and national tallgrass prairie.

Your submission signals an opportunity for USDA Forest Service to explore with you the ideas/projects/program in your submittal and your feedback.

Submission: For submission procedures, please see Section **V: How to Respond.**

A. Forms

If you would like to provide interest or feedback, you can respond using the forms located within the Grants.gov website. In addition, direct links are provided below.

- SF-424 Form: Application for Federal Assistance (OMB 4040-0001)
- Attachments Form: "Attachments Form" (attach documents for submission into Grants.gov using this form)
- Narrative Statement Form: Home | Grants.gov. Search using the following opportunity number USDA-FS-R13-2024-24-25-RM.
- Please ensure that when you complete your forms for this proposal that you

"Save As" and give your file a new name. **DO NOT** "Print to PDF". Once you have saved your forms under a new name, you will upload those forms into the attachment document.

Note: If you receive an error when opening a form, it may indicate that you have either opened the PDF file with an incompatible version of Adobe PDF software or you have opened the PDF file with a browser that has a built-in PDF viewer that is not compatible with Grants.gov. Save the form on your computer and then open the most up-to-date Adobe PDF software and open the saved file on your computer.

If you do not have a compatible version of Adobe PDF software, please reference the steps below to download a compatible version.

1. Go to http://get.adobe.com/reader/otherversions/
2. Under STEP 1, select your operating system.
3. Under STEP 2, select your preferred language.
4. Under STEP 3, select the version of compatible software you want to download.
5. Under OPTIONAL OFFERS, you may check or uncheck these offers based on your preference.
6. Click on the DOWNLOAD NOW button to begin the download of the software.

VII. Response Notice Timeline

A. The agency will send an auto-response when response submissions have been received.

B. The agency will send a personalized follow-up message within one month of receiving responses to this OOI.

This is not a grant announcement. It is a non-funded, non-competitive outreach of interest (OOI) announcement to gauge applicants' interest in the Forest Service program of work. Responding to this OOI will not give an advantage to any organization or individual for any possible subsequent award action. Not responding to this OOI does not preclude participation in any future funding opportunity announcement, if any is issued.

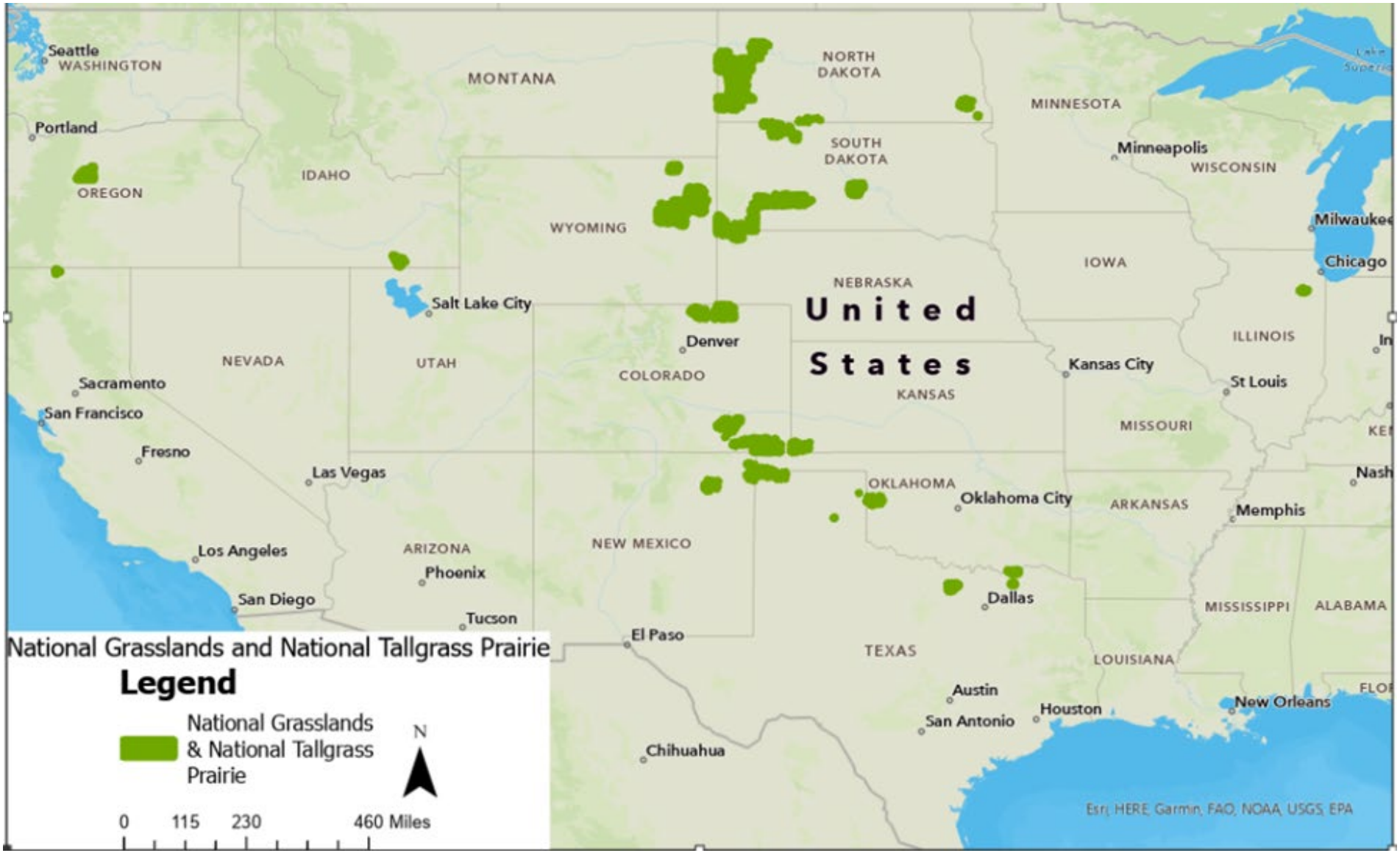


Figure 1. Map Showing the Location of the 20 National Grasslands and 1 National Tallgrass Prairie