

Improving Grazing Networks in Kansas

A NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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PHOTO (COVER AND THIS PAGE): THE SMOKY HILL RIVER RUNNING THROUGH A PASTURE IN WALLACE COUNTY, KANSAS IN JUNE 2023.



Grazing Lands in Kansas

Kansas ranks 12th in acres of pasture (grazed grassland), grassland (land dominated by native grass, not necessarily grazed), and rangeland (land providing a range of forage including shrubs and woodland) – herein referred to collectively as pastureland. We estimate that in Kansas there are over 21,000 farms that produce cattle and calves and over 2,000 that produce other small ruminants that are ideal for grazing the vast and diverse landscape of pastureland found in Kansas. Further, the Kansas Livestock Association reports: Kansas has 44.8 million acres of farm ground, of which 15.5 million acres is pastureland. Cattle provide an ideal mechanism for efficiently utilizing grasses and plants on pastureland (Kansas Livestock Association, n.d.).

Kansas' diversity of ecoregions, including the diminishing tallgrass prairie, makes it an ideal starting point for creating a conservation-oriented training and mentorship model for grazing networks that could be scaled up and expanded to other regions.

Our Project

Over the course of this project, funded by the Natural Resources Conservation Service through 2028, American Farmland Trust will be engaging partners, ranchers, service providers, and others involved in grazing management in Kansas to foster a more connected grazing network that delivers programming to improve technical assistance and engagement with ranchers, while also improving grazing management and resource stewardship.

To support conservation technical assistance and grazing management planning and implementation, project partners need to first identify what barriers might be limiting ranchers, including those who are historically underserved (such as women and non-operating landowners), in accessing supportive technical assistance (TA) and financial assistance (FA). By first identifying the specific barriers to accessing TA and FA for these producers, AFT and partners can best meet the needs of those producers.

Understanding the existing barriers and support needs can enable us to improve outreach and the design of programs to better meet the diverse needs of the Kansas grazing lands community.



Methods

Our team set out to ask the following questions:

- i. How can we expand grazing networks in Kansas?
- ii. How can we expand access to grazing management planning technical and financial assistance in the region?
- iii. What are the largest barriers to accessing TA and FA for grazing management, and do these vary depending on who the ranchers are (e.g., non-operating landlords, women, minorities)?
- iv. What topics and format might work best to reach a diverse cadre of ranchers as part of this project?
- vi. What networks are people already a part of, and how can they be improved?

To answer these questions, we carried out the following:

1. Conducted a **listening session** with our project advisors to gauge their early responses to these questions and explore who else we might engage to answer these questions
2. Hosted **seven in-depth interviews** with ranchers and service providers from across Kansas.
3. Administered a **statewide survey** with 107 respondents identifying either as a livestock producer (89; 83%), technical service provider or ag professional (21; 20%; 9 also identifying as a livestock producer), and/or a non-operating landowner (5; 5%).¹

Our team analyzed both the qualitative and quantitative data collected as part of this project. We have synthesized the key themes as they relate to both the questions and emergent findings below.

1. See Appendix A and B for data on our survey respondents' stated demographics, farm characteristics, and county location.

Survey and Interview Findings

Challenges with Accessing Financial Assistance (FA) and Technical Assistance (TA)

Through analyzing the interview and survey data from ranchers and service providers, we found a few themes that were often mentioned by participants. First, the most discussed barrier to accessing FA and TA in the interviews was simply that **the bureaucratic system is very difficult for producers to navigate**. Many gave examples of the extensive paperwork and in-field requirements tied to FA that discourage producers from pursuing FA in the first place. This is well articulated in the following quotes from interviewees:



Are you willing [to do that] to earn that financial assistance? And there's no doubt hoops to jump through. So you know, to get that money, you gotta do this. You gotta have the right number of animals. You gotta graze it the right amount of time. So it kind of challenged them and financially by saying, you know, you got too many cows, that's why you know these issues are there and they don't want to change. And so there's been a real hesitancy about making changes in order to get financial assistance."

— TA provider who works closely with ranchers



It's just if you've ever set foot in an FSA office, they pull out file folder this big shoved full of paper and they open and then you just start signing."

— Rancher and service provider

In the survey, we asked "What challenges do you face when accessing grazing management FA?" The top five challenges listed were related to an onerous bureaucratic process and limitations that discouraged rancher participation (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE CHALLENGES (N=98)

FA CHALLENGES ANSWER CHOICES	% OF N	COUNT
I don't know what I qualify for	48%	47
Regulatory and procedural requirements are too onerous	29%	28
Intimidated by the process	28%	27
Cost-share rates per acre for practices are insufficient to cover my costs	27%	26
Structure of FA programs doesn't fit my operation/management interests	24%	24
Limited time to pursue FA	21%	21
Not applicable, as I have never pursued FA	19%	19
Insufficient technical assistance provided along with FA	17%	17
No local contact or not enough staff capacity at local orgs to assist me	11%	11
Other	8%	8

We investigated whether those survey respondents that self-identified as historically underserved producers (HUP) answered this FA question differently (n=37). We found no large differences in HUP-respondents' answers, with their top three FA challenges being "I don't know what I qualify for," "intimidated by the process," and "structure of FA programs doesn't fit my operation/management interests," in that order. The last challenge makes sense when considering the slight differences in HUP operations (e.g., more goat operations and smaller acreage on average; see Appendix A). Of note, insufficient cost-share rates did not show up in HUP-respondents' top three FA challenges, not even top five, as it does when assessing all survey responses, with only 16% of HUP respondents selecting insufficient cost-share rates as a FA challenge.

Below are additional details provided by survey respondents that further highlight this theme of the difficulties of navigating the bureaucratic system to receive FA:



That application process is onerous, then drags on too long before ultimately finding out that your application was not selected for funding."



Issues with 'out of funds,' ideas 'not doable,' argumentative personnel"



Hard to qualify for programs"



Grazing restrictions are too severe"

Other challenges that interviewees spoke about regarding TA and FA include some challenges with **geographic inequity** (arguing that some parts of Kansas are better resourced than others), the **short-term nature of FA contracts**, and the **need for more TA opportunities that are not tied to FA contracts**. Along the lines of this last challenge, a few service providers also stressed that an overemphasis on the financial incentive to do conservation work impedes ranchers from developing internal motivation for adopting certain conservation practices. In other words, they want programs to incentivize farmers to adopt conservation practices not because they can get paid to do them, but because it is the right thing to do. This suggests that more outreach and education might be needed regarding the broad benefits of conservation practice implementation.

One opportunity that interviewees spoke about in the context of ways to improve TA is the idea that **ranchers need mentors or others to provide grounded and realistic support that is relevant to their context** (e.g., livestock type, number of animals, land & infrastructure availability, etc.). Some quotes from our interviews illustrate this as follows:



But get together once a year and go look at what someone's doing somewhere. Have a list of people to call in your area as far as a mentor networkship."

—Beginning rancher



It's good to kind of find those people who are knowledgeable that we can, you know, pick up the phone and call and, you know, run ideas through. It's super helpful."
—Service provider

In our survey, in addition to asking what challenges respondents face when accessing FA, we also asked what challenges they face when accessing grazing management TA. The survey results support the findings from interviews and identify additional challenges ranchers face (see Table 2). The most common response (39%) was that respondents have never pursued TA, while many also noted that TA is too often tied to FA (25%) or that staff capacity at local organizations/agencies is limited (24%) and thus impedes their ability to get access to TA. Finally, 19% of survey respondents said they “would prefer a peer network for TA but none exists in my region,” which provides some support for one of the major findings from our interviews (presented in the following section) about the need for support that is relevant to local context, with a specific emphasis on peer-to-peer opportunities. There were no large differences in HUP-only responses to this question, with HUP-respondents also ranking “not applicable” and “too often tied to FA assistance” as the top two TA challenges (n=36).

TABLE 2: TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CHALLENGES (N=93)

TA CHALLENGES ANSWER CHOICES	% OF N	COUNT
Not Applicable, as I have never pursued TA	39%	36
Technical assistance is too often tied to financial assistance	25%	23
Not enough staff capacity at local organizations to help me	24%	22
I would prefer a peer network for TA but none exists in my region	19%	18
Other (please specify)	14%	13

Opportunities for Improved Networks and Outreach

One of the major themes from in-depth interviews was how important it is **to build relationships** and **foster peer-to-peer connections** as well as relationships with landowners/tenants and experts in the field who could provide more support to ranchers. Many respondents noted just how important relationships are and could be centered more in outreach efforts that build trust, foster rapport, and drive engagement. Some key quotes illustrate this insight:



You know those individuals that, you know, you just had time to spend time with and you develop relationships that weren't just tied to a contract, it was tied to a land unit or an operation."
—Service provider



When we find success in conservation, I think there's a trust-building relationship that happens."
—Service provider

When discussing challenges with conservation management outreach, our interviewees explored what improvements could be made, such as:

- Improving the cost/benefit ratio of adopting certain practices—we need to make the economics work out
- Supporting people navigating USDA and other institutions, particularly for historically underserved producers, because navigating these bureaucratic systems is intimidating
- Improving outreach with those who are not already a part of existing grazing management and/or conservation networks, reaching beyond the “choir” (i.e., early-adopters of conservation practices)
- Changing the outreach format to get more producers in the “room,” from the kinds of events that we host to the balance of virtual and in-person events

One focus of discussion was on how to improve outreach to historically underserved producers, including women and non-operating landowners. Some themes that emerged from that discussion, not already mentioned above, include the desire to:

- Improve support for landowners and tenants to make conservation-oriented grazing management decisions together
- Break through and engage these audiences, as they are underserved and not as connected to many of the existing grazing networks, but this is very difficult
- Create more resources for landless ranchers (i.e., renters) and beginning ranchers (i.e., less than 10 years of experience)
- Define who is underserved, as there is some disagreement on who that is. Is it large-scale producers? Is it non-operating landowners? Is it beginning ranchers? Is it racial and ethnic minorities? Or those who are financially disadvantaged?

OUTREACH FORMAT AND COMMUNICATION PREFERENCES

In our survey we asked respondents, “What information delivery mode do you find to be most impactful?” using a three-point Likert scale of not impactful (1), somewhat impactful (2), or very impactful (3). In Table 3, we present the weighted average for each answer choice. We do not present HUP-only results in the following tables, as there was no large difference in those responses to outreach-related questions. Any slight differences are mentioned below in context.

Again, we see a desire for relationship-building even within a question regarding outreach preferences. The top two most impactful ways for farmers to receive information are through in-person one-on-one technical assistance and in-person network gatherings with other ranchers and service providers. The least impactful information delivery method, according to survey respondents, is “virtual network sharing.” **The takeaway here is that there is a desire for in-person over virtual information sharing events.** One survey respondent did make a good point that it’s all about “location-location-location... Kansas is a big state, and travel greatly affects getting to meetings.” In terms of location, there was one difference between all survey responses and HUP-only responses in this vein. HUP-respondents (n=36) weighted “one-on-one virtual assistance” (2.3) much higher than the average of all responses (1.8); all other information delivery modes were within 0.3 weighted average.

TABLE 3: PREFERRED INFORMATION DELIVERY RANKED FROM MOST TO LEAST IMPACTFUL (N=96)

ANSWER CHOICES	WEIGHTED AVERAGE*
One-on-one in-person technical assistance, ideally on my land	2.5
In-person network gatherings for sharing/chatting/resourcing among other farmers/resource providers	2.4
Online videos, shorter duration (~3-30 minutes)	2.3
Field day (~6 hours), full weekday	2.2
Evening workshop/class (~2 hours)	2.1
Online videos, longer duration (~30 minutes to 2 hours)	2.0
Lunch and learn (~1 hour)	2.0
Field day (~6 hours), full weekend day	1.9
One-on-one virtual technical assistance	1.8
Virtual network for sharing/chatting/resourcing via social media or email listserv	1.7

* The weighted average is calculated using this weighting system: 1 = not impactful, 2 = somewhat impactful, and 3 = very impactful.

Additionally, we asked survey respondents, “How do you prefer to get (or in the case of service providers, provide) information for upcoming events/activities?” There was a clear preference for emails to notify one about any upcoming events, with 91% of respondents preferring to receive emails. Social media was 51% of respondents preferred way of receiving information after emails. When comparing technical service providers’ responses to ranchers’ responses, the service providers had the same top three communication preferences, specifically: 81% email, 71% social media, and 29% letters/postcards.

TABLE 4: COMMUNICATION PREFERENCES (N=100)

ANSWER CHOICES	% OF N	COUNT
Email	91%	91
Social media	51%	51
Letters/postcards	41%	41
Word of mouth	28%	28
Flyers in the community	18%	18
Listserv with my network	8%	8
Radio	9%	9
YouTube	7%	7
Other (please specify) *	7%	7

* Responses to “other” included newspaper and texts.

TRUSTED SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND THE IMPORTANCE OF NETWORKS

In discussions with interviewees, many people talked about the strength of some of the existing organizations doing good work in Kansas. Organizations like the Tallgrass Grazing Alliance and Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition came up often. However, others noted that not everyone knows how to find networks or mentioned that parts of the state, particularly the west, are less well-resourced and networked than other parts of Kansas. Respondents also noted that it can be hard to coordinate across different organizations, and some ranchers may not know where to go for certain kinds of information, a problem clearly articulated by a service provider who said:



That's probably my biggest one because it seems like there's so much good information being put out there by the different groups; it is just trying to get that information to people."

According to survey respondents, the top five grazing organizations that ranchers are going to for grazing management advice and collaboration include federal agencies, Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition and extension networks (see Table 5). HUP-respondents (n=36) ranked the same top three organizations but ranked "local soil and water conservation district" lower, with only 16% of HUP-respondents including districts in their selection.

TABLE 5: TOP FIVE GRAZING ORGANIZATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT ADVICE AND/OR COLLABORATION (N=98)

ORGANIZATIONS	% OF N	COUNT
Federal agency (e.g., USDA NRCS)	47%	46
Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition	45%	44
Extension-based network	33%	32
Local Soil and Water Conservation District	30%	29
Kansas Soil Health Alliance	23%	23

CONSERVATION AND RESOURCE CONCERN TOPICS: GETTING PEOPLE IN THE "FIELD"

During the interviews, our experienced service providers were keen to better understand what resource issues producers are most concerned about, as well as topics they should cover at events or in publications. This knowledge can help improve technical assistance and build more relevant and effective programming. Over 60% of respondents (Table 6) indicated water availability, woody-species encroachment, invasive species management, and extreme weather events to be their priority resource concerns.

TABLE 6: RESOURCE CONCERNS IDENTIFIED BY SURVEY RESPONDENTS (N=99)

ANSWER CHOICES	% OF N	COUNT
Water availability	62%	61
Woody-species encroachment	62%	61
Invasive species management	61%	60
Extreme weather events (e.g., drought, flooding, etc.)	60%	59
Over grazing	38%	38
Soil health issues	30%	30

We asked technical service providers to answer the resource concerns question, as well, but in terms of “What resource concerns do the producers you work with have on their land?” The top three resource concerns that the 20 technical service providers respondents selected varied slightly from what ranchers identified as their top resource concerns. **Providers’ top three answer choices were: invasive species management (80%), woody-species encroachment (75%), and over-grazing (60%).** This excludes water availability, identified as a top resource concern by rancher respondents, and includes over-grazing, identified by only 38% of rancher respondents as a resource concern. However, HUP-respondents (n=37) did list over-grazing (49%) and soil health issues (46%) higher than the average of all survey respondents.

Keeping those resource concerns in mind, we then asked respondents, “What topics do you, or the producers you work with or rent to, want more training and information on?” The top two selected topics were woody-encroachment (66%) and drought management (54%) (Table 7), which nicely reflect survey respondents’ top two resource concerns (water availability and woody-species encroachment, as shown in Table 6).

TABLE 7: TOPICS THAT PRODUCERS WANT MORE TRAINING AND INFORMATION ON AS IDENTIFIED BY SURVEY RESPONDENTS (N=96)

ANSWER CHOICES	% OF N	COUNT
Woody encroachment and invasive species management	66%	63
Drought management	54%	52
Grazing management planning	44%	42
Rotational grazing	44%	42
Water management	40%	38
Virtual fencing (or other new technologies)	40%	38
Cover cropping for grazing	38%	36
Plant identification	38%	36
Advanced grazing management	36%	35
Prescribed burning	36%	35
Stocking density determination	34%	33
Succession and/or land transfer planning	33%	32
Soil health management (including soil testing)	27%	26
Land protection	27%	26
Financial/budget management	24%	23
Wildlife habitat	18%	17
Grazing for ecosystem services	18%	17
Correct genetic selection of livestock/selecting the right breed for your situation	15%	14
Calving timing	11%	11
Mental health/wellness	7%	7

Technical service providers also selected woody-encroachment as the top topic that producers want more training and information on, with 80% of service providers selecting that topic. Their remaining top topics were as follows: drought management (55%), cover cropping for grazing (55%), prescribed burning (50%), stocking density determination (50%), and grazing management planning (50%). These results show another difference between what technical service providers think ranchers want to learn about versus what ranchers stated they want to learn about, such as rotational grazing and water management.

Recommendations

This assessment provides some guidance for engaging in outreach and program development to better support grazing networks in Kansas. The following recommendations provide a roadmap for the remainder of the project.

- Building relationships, honing partnerships, leveraging peer-to-peer opportunities, and engaging with trusted advisors were key themes across the survey and interview results. We recommend the program build synergy from work already being implemented in the region and leveraging that to reach more ranchers in the state.
- Explore diverse regional assets, offering additional resources for western Kansas and areas that have experienced less integration with existing networks.
- Develop programming that directly targets women and non-operating landowners, as well as others who are underserved, to improve engagement with non-traditional audiences.
- Offer engagement on key topics and resource concerns identified as a priority among survey respondents, including help curating existing information for ranchers to make it easier to use/engage with.
- Develop hybrid gathering opportunities, utilizing video, social media, and in-person field day opportunities focused on enhancing relationships and fostering networks of peers and possible mentor/mentee relationships, in addition to grazing management content.
- Emphasize technical assistance support and one-on-one opportunities for ranchers to get support for their questions and resource concerns; continue to share financial assistance resources, but emphasize technical support that may require less “red tape” and bureaucratic hurdles for ranchers to access/engage with.
- Seek input from partners and producers along the way to continue to deliver programming that best meets their needs.

Contact

To keep up with the progress of this project or share your insights as a partner or rancher on the ground in Kansas, please reach out to Kinzie Reiss, our project manager in Kansas.

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Appendix A

KANSAS LIVESTOCK PRODUCERS NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY RESPONDENTS' DEMOGRAPHICS AND FARM CHARACTERISTICS

DEMOGRAPHICS	ANSWER CHOICE	%	COUNT	N
Self-identified as HUP	Yes	37%	37	99
Gender	Male	74%	61	82
	Female	26%	21	
Age	< 45 years	29%	24	83
	45-65 years	47%	39	
	> 65 years	24%	20	
Role	Livestock producer with >10 years experience	58%	62	107
	Livestock producer with <10 years experience	25%	27	
	Non-operating landowner	5%	5	
	Technical service provider or ag professional	20%	21	
Education	High school degree or equivalent	5%	4	85
	Some college, no degree	13%	11	
	Associate's or Bachelor's Degree	62%	53	
	Master's &/or Doctorate Degree	20%	17	
Race	American Indian or Alaskan Native	1%	1	85
	Black or African American	8%	7	
	Hispanic or Latino Origin	2%	2	
	White or European	85%	72	
	Other	2%	2	
Veteran Status	Currently a veteran	18%	15	84
	Never served	82%	69	
Land Tenure	I own the land I grow on	77%	69	90
	I have a short-term lease (renewed each year or every other year) for the land I grow on	29%	26	
	I have a long-term lease (3 or more years) for the land I grow on	22%	20	
	Other (please specify)	12%	11	

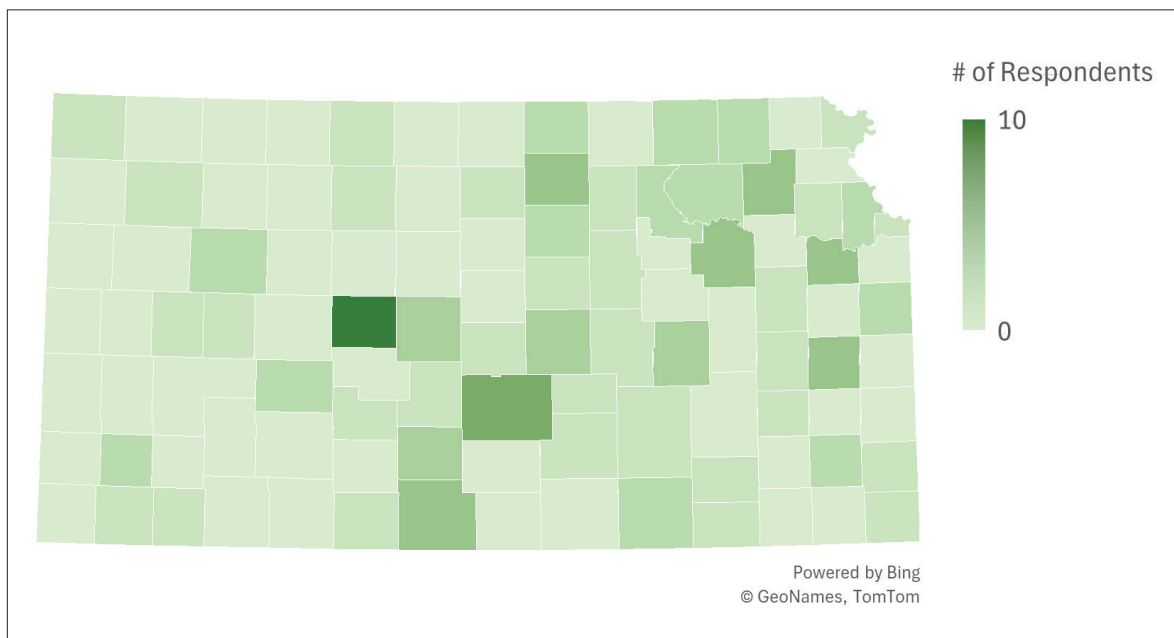
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FARM CHARACTERISTICS	ANSWER CHOICE	%	COUNT	N
Livestock species & products	Cow/calf operation	78%	71	
	Goats	15%	14	
	Feedlot	1%	1	
	Sheep	14%	13	
	Stocker/backgrounding cattle operation	22%	20	
	Poultry	14%	13	
	Breeding	13%	12	
	Dairy	4%	4	
	Fiber	1%	1	
	Meat	18%	16	
	Other	10%	9	91
Grazing Land	Pastureland, owned	84%	76	
	Pastureland, leased	49%	44	
	Public grassland/rangeland	1%	1	
	Other	11%	10	90
Winter Feed	Cash crop residue grazing	36%	33	
	Cover crops, grazing	32%	29	
	Cover crops, bales	11%	10	
	Pasture/forage, grazing	45%	41	
	Hay, grass	67%	61	
	Hay, legumes (e.g., alfalfa)	33%	30	
	Other supplemental feed	27%	25	
	Purchasing hay from outside source	27%	25	
	Silage, bales	14%	13	
	Other	7%	6	91
Herd Size	0-100 head	60%	53	
	100-500 head	34%	30	
	500-1,000 head	4%	4	
	1,000 - 3,000 head	2%	2	
	> 3,000 head	0%	0	89
Farm Size	< 100	20%	17	
	100-1,000	48%	42	
	1,000-3,000	20%	17	
	> 3,000	13%	11	87

Appendix B

IMPROVING GRAZING NETWORKS IN KANSAS SURVEY RESPONSES BY COUNTY



Acknowledgments

Special thanks to our project partners, the Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition, led by David Kraft and Bruce Wells, and the Kansas Soil Health Alliance, led by Jennifer Simmelink.





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