

Healthy grass lands are important

Intro

"The wonder of the wild and windy Grasslands, Feel the dirt on my hands All it needs is hard work and patience, Take care of the land, it'll take care of you If you tend to its roots, it'll tend to yours too, We all reap what we sow And the fabric of the grasslands Is where good things grow"

Hello, my name is Abigail Lewis, I am 16 years old, and I am from Flandreau, and I've lived my whole life on the rolling prairies of South Dakota. I think the lyrics of Maygen & The Birdwatcher's song "where the good things grow" beautifully captures the rich environment of our state.

Unfortunately, this vital global resource is under attack and most people don't even realize it. Grasslands are the most threatened and least protected biome. (According the NRCS funded research in a 2022 issue of the journal of conservation biology) "The case to conserve the world's last remaining regional grasslands requires greater societal appreciation of their unique value as a major global biome." My competitors and I are all members of Generation Z, we are a group of people known for our connections to technology, our purchasing power, and our concern for the environment. It's the responsibility of Gen Z south Dakotans to use these characteristics to make a positive impact where we live to help the good things of our grass lands to grow.

This natural resource is critical to all aspects of our lives. Today I will address how strong grasslands foster Healthy environments, Healthy economies, Healthy humans & communities

Environment

Grasslands provide various ecosystem services. From biodiversity to climate change resiliency and drought mitigation.

The Grasslands, Rangelands, Savannahs and Shrublands Alliance asserted the value of grassland contributions to global air quality in 2024. Avoiding conversion of grasslands could prevent up to 4.25 gigatons of emissions globally by 2050.

In our state, The South Dakota Grassland coalition says that grasslands enhance water quality, reduce runoff, and help maintain soil health.

A healthy wide-open prairie contributes to breathable air and a livable environment that my friends and I can enjoy.

Economy

It also contributes significantly to the economy at all levels. Globally, grasslands contribute to the livelihoods of over 800 million people. Directly and indirectly more than 2 billion people are linked to grassland-based livelihoods, as reported by the GRaSS Alliance report in 2024

Furthermore, the byproducts of these healthy environments contribute billions of dollars to the global economy.

According to the US fish and Wildlife service, grasslands support thousands of pollinator species such as bees, birds, and butterflies. Which in the United States, these wild pollinators provide services estimated to be four to six billion dollars annually.

Closer to home, imperiled grasslands threaten our bottom line.

The Great Plains Grasslands Extension Partnership in 2023 identified woody encroachments as a significant threat to rangeland production negatively impacting county, state, and regional economies to the tune of 323 million dollars annually.

Health

In addition to economic vitality, vibrant grasslands contribute to healthy communities and healthy bodies.

According to the South Dakota Grass Lands Initiative 2023, healthy grasslands make healthy communities. They are not alone, researchers and policy makers from Canada to the US, and Australia are all drawing connections between healthy grassland environments and cultural sustainability of indigenous peoples and agricultural communities.

In addition to a community level benefit flourishing grasslands also support positive individual health factors.

According to the NRCS in 2022, strong grass lands contribute to clean water, healthy air quality, nutrient rich food, and indirectly contribute to positive mental health through recreational and cultural activities.

Closing

Today we've considered how These wide-open spaces hold immense ecological, economic, and cultural importance. I hope all my fellow Generation Z competitors will utilize this contest as an opportunity to learn and share about the vital importance of our grasslands. As the song lyrics note, *"It's where the good things grow." "All in perfect balance, the way nature is meant to be. All it needs is hard work and patience. People tend to overcomplicate it. We all reap what we sow, and the fabric of the grasslands, the magic of the grasslands is where good things grow."*