

US Forest Service celebrates 75 years of national grasslands

Written by L. F. Chambers
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WASHINGTON, June 18, 2012 -- The [U.S. Forest Service](#) will celebrate [National Grasslands Week](#) from June 17-23, showcasing the beauty, history and economic value of these national treasures on the 75th anniversary of the legislation that established them.

America's 20 national grasslands, spanning 12 states and 4 million acres, were created through the [Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937](#), authorizing the federal government to acquire damaged lands for rehabilitation. Thirteen of these national grasslands reside in the Great Plains, where the ravages of the Dust Bowl left the soil bare of vegetation for years. Today, the benefits grasslands provide are valued in the billions of dollars.

"Our national grasslands remain beautiful examples of successful restoration programs," said U.S. Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell. "These lands are once again rich habitats brimming with native wildlife, grasses and wildflowers. They are also economic engines, generating jobs and bolstering rural American communities."

The national grasslands offer a wealth of recreation and education opportunities for more than 1 million annual visitors. The grasslands feature some of the world's best bird-watching experiences as well as camping, hiking, biking, fishing, hunting, horseback riding, target shooting, off-highway vehicle riding, picnicking and learning activities. Scenic drives offer unique geological features, wildlife and stellar locations for stargazing.

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History buffs can visit old cemeteries and homesteads and take guided tours of Native American petroglyphs. They can also share in the experience of early settlers and their trek on the Santa Fe Trail.

“It took decades to restore the national grasslands from the barren landscapes of the Dust Bowl, to the rich prairie habitats we see today,” said Tidwell. “Every American should experience these unique grasslands that are so much a part of our rich natural heritage.”

The national grasslands provide tremendous benefits including pollination of native and agricultural plants estimated at \$6 billion annually. Livestock grazing and energy ventures including oil, gas, coal and wind also contribute to the economic benefits provided by these lands. They help prevent drought and floods, maintain biodiversity, generate and preserve soils, contribute to climate stability and protect watersheds, streams and river channels.

These lands were managed by the USDA’s Soil and Conservation Service, now the Natural Resources Conservation Service, until 1960 when they were transferred to the U.S. Forest Service and designated as national grasslands.

The mission of the [U.S. Forest Service](#) is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation’s forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. Recreational activities on our lands contribute \$14.5 billion annually to the U.S. economy. The agency manages 193 million acres of public land, provides assistance to state and private landowners, and maintains the largest forestry research organization in the world.

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