



Pocket Guide to  
Wildlife-Friendly Ranching

*"If the wildlife aren't doing well, the cows aren't either."*

-John Stewart, Wild Sky rancher



SUPPORTING  
WILDLIFE-FRIENDLY  
RANCHING



**Interested in becoming a Wild Sky Rancher?**

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[www.wildskybeef.org](http://www.wildskybeef.org)

**Wild Sky's all-natural, 100 percent grass-fed beef** is available at markets and restaurants nationwide. Wild Sky is an endeavor of American Prairie Reserve, an organization building a wildlife area that ultimately will be 50% larger than Yellowstone National Park and enjoyed by people around the world.

## Why Wild Sky?

*"Wild Sky offers so much opportunity."*

-Michelle Fox, Wild Sky rancher

Conservation and ranching are often viewed as opposing forces. We are changing that dynamic through Wild Sky. Wild Sky's mission is to support wildlife-friendly ranching through the sale of premium beef. This business conserves wildlife and contributes to economic activity in Montana's Northern Great Plains.

## About the Beef

*"When I tried Wild Sky, I knew I had in front of me an incredible product—grass-fed, without the grassy taste...so tender that it's hard to believe it's not corn-fed."*

-Chef Kostas

Wild Sky offers consumers a great tasting, grass-fed steak—free of hormones and antibiotics. We collaborate with a network of like-minded ranchers, primarily in the upper mid-west, to raise cattle according to the strict standards of Wild Sky (see separate cattle standards guide). The result is a healthy and exceptionally good-tasting option for you, your friends, and your family to enjoy.

## What is Wildlife-friendly Ranching?

*“Wildlife fits right in with ranching. It’s co-existence. It’s a reminder that we’re a small part of the bigger world.”*

—Tuffy Helgeson, Wild Sky rancher

Cattle ranching is a major industry in the Northern Great Plains. The Wild Sky team believes effective conservation strategies promote the health of both people and nature. This requires creating opportunities for landowners to benefit economically from wildlife.

Wild Sky promotes wildlife-friendly ranching by returning a portion of its profit to participating ranchers who raise cattle to a set of specific conservation standards. The following wildlife-friendly ranching protocols cover a number of areas relating to conservation, from the preservation of native prairie to the protection of prairie dogs.

## Meet a Few Wild Sky Ranchers

### The Stewart Family

Wild Sky rancher John Stewart says that paying attention to the health of the grass and soil helps him and his wife, Kirsty, run a profitable ranch. Kirsty chimes in, “He takes better care of the cattle and the land than himself!” This same level of attention to detail helps John and Kirsty care for the animals that roam their land by ensuring the land is healthy enough to support them, whether they’re cows, pronghorn or sharptail.

The Stewarts have proven that they are good stewards of the land. It made good financial sense, according to John, for them to sign on with Wild Sky. Being part of Wild Sky means engaging in – and being compensated for – wildlife-friendly ranching practices. Some examples include not tilling and tolerating prairie dogs.

### The Fox Family

Believing that American Prairie Reserve and the agricultural heritage of the Northern Great Plains landscape can be shared and can thrive through a positive collaboration, Stephen, Michelle and their children signed on as Wild Sky ranchers. The family already has installed wildlife-friendly fencing around their F Diamond X Ranch, allowing pronghorn and other wildlife to move freely across their property.

Wild Sky offers so much opportunity, “especially to younger ranchers who are willing to think outside the box,” Michelle notes – all while upholding their ancestors’ deep appreciation for the land and wildlife.

## How Does it Work?

*“Wild Sky promotes small-scale ranching and large-scale conservation.”*

–Laura Huggins, American Prairie Reserve

American Prairie Reserve uses a grasslands health assessment tool called the Freese Scale to evaluate how land management decisions impact ecological conditions. The scale is a framework that helps land managers evaluate properties and track progress toward creating a healthy prairie ecosystem.

The Freese Scale for ranching includes seven different ecological processes such as hydrology and vegetation, each of which are given a 0-7 rating. Every year, Reserve staff and a third-party evaluator score land units according to the scale. It is important to note that these are basic guidelines that will be adapted to each ranch. Wild Sky ranchers also receive a detailed document, updated annually, explaining how we measure and score the protocols. Participating Wild Sky ranchers are paid more as they move up the scale.

# 7

These guidelines provide a scoring system, on a scale of 0 to 7, for the following management categories:

1. No Tilling (soil and vegetation management)
2. Herbivore Abundance (deer, elk, pronghorn, prairie dog)
3. Natural Hydrology
4. Landscape Connection (wildlife-friendly fencing)
5. Carnivore Compatible (predators present)
6. Species of Concern (sage grouse, swift fox, burrowing owl, etc.)
7. Ranch Size



**G1****No Tilling (Soil & Vegetation Management)**

Goal: To restore and maintain native vegetation and the natural soil and other physical conditions that support it.

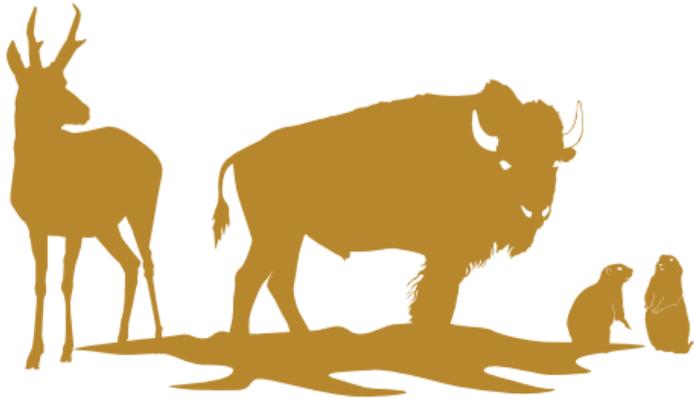
score	Native/restored prairie as % of total livestock prod. acres	% native/restored prairie in conservation easement	Conditions
0	<80	<30	Conditions required to qualify for any level of score include: No cultivation of native prairie; no irrigation of prairie land; no mechanical, chemical or fertilizer treatments to alter native species composition and productivity (but can be used to control invasives); no harvesting or cutting of prairie except for explicit and agreed to management purposes; rigorous program of control of invasive plants in place.
1	80-85	30-40	
2		40-50	
3	85-90	50-60	
4		60-70	
5	90-95	70-80	
6		80-90	
7	95-100	90-100	
Result (weight)	(1x)	(2x)	Ave. weighted score =

## Herbivore Abundance

Goal: To expand and maintain populations of herbivorous mammals.

score	Deer	Elk	Pronghorn	Bighorn	Bison	Acres of Prairie Dog colonies	Conditions
0						<50	<p>If species is not in vicinity of and unlikely to frequent the property or habitat is not suitable, no score is given for that species and it is excluded from calculating the average score.</p> <p><i>Additional conditions below</i></p>
1						50-200	
2						200-500	
3						500-1K	
4						1K-2K	
5						2K-5K	
6						>5K	
7						>5K	
Result (weight)	(1x)	(2x)	(2x)	(2x)	(3x)	(3x)	Ave. weighted score =

- No tolerance
- Infequent hazing, no damage hunts
- No hazing or damage hunts
- Non-contiguous
- Contiguous
- Number days of animal use



### *Additional conditions*

Bison must be managed for conservation purposes.

Wildlife-friendly fence design score of 5 or greater required or score of 3 or greater for deer, elk, pronghorn and bighorn sheep. Well-placed open gates/passageways required for score of 3 or greater for bison.

No shooting or poisoning or other control methods used on prairie dogs anywhere on property.

Livestock stocking rate must be adjusted to accommodate forage use by native herbivores.

Score	Check dams/ miles of stream	Wetlands restored (acres)	% of riparian acres excluded from grazing	Acres restored wet meadows from hayfields	Miles of stream restored	Riparian Condition	Conditions
0	>0.6	0	0	0	0	poor	Restored wetlands and streams must be officially recognized by federal, state or tribal agency or qualified independent third party.
1	0.5–.6	>0	>10	>0	>0		
2	0.4–.5	>10	>25	>10	>1	fair	
3	0.3–.4	>20	>40	>20	>5		
4	0.2–.3	>40	>55	>40	>10	good	
5	0.1–.2	>60	>70	>60	>15		
6	0–.1	>80	>85	>80	>20	excellent	
7	0	>100	>100	>100	>25		
Result (weight)	(1x)	(2x)			(2x)		Ave. weighted score =

## Landscape Connection Goal: To reduce fragmentation.

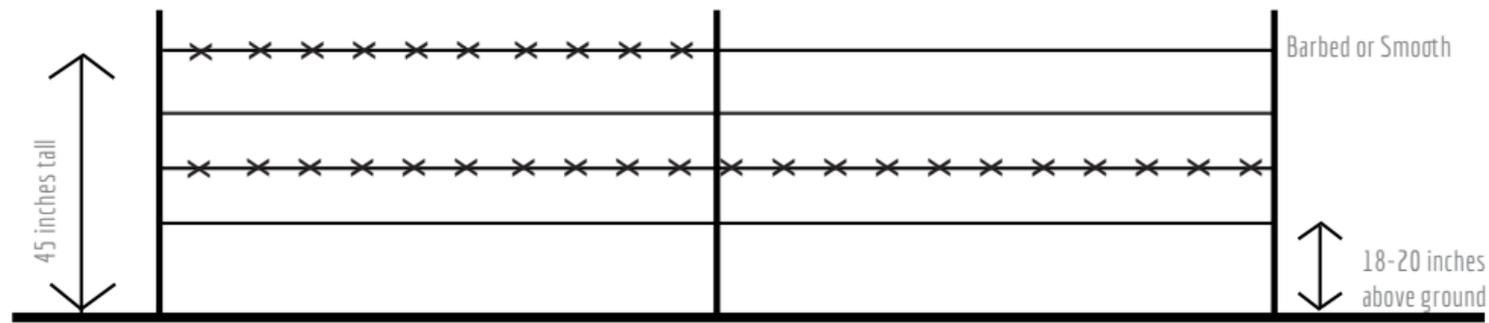
Score	Fence density*	Wildlife-friendly fence	Ranch infrastructure	Cultivated or otherwise altered land	Road density	Other	Conditions
0	>2	None	Numerous buildings, windmills, etc.	Cultivated land, extensively fragmented	>1	Extensive	Scores may be lowered if structures or cultivated land have direct and significant negative effects on sensitive species, habitats or key ecological processes.
1	1.5-2						
2	1-1.5	Modest amount			0.5-1		
3	0.5-1		All structures concentrated in one place	Modest fragmentation by cultivation		Moderate	
4							
5	0.1-0.5	Substantial			0.1-0.5		
6							
7	0	All interior & perimeter fencing = WFFD	No structures	No fragmentation by cultivation	<0.1	None	
Result (weight)							Ave. weighted score =

The goal is to minimize the number and extent of novel or artificial features such as fences, windmills, power lines, poles, buildings, and planted windbreaks that cause breaks or gaps in native prairie. These breaks can impede the movement of and injure/kill wildlife, deter nesting grassland birds, and increase the hunting effectiveness of natural (and exotic) predators by providing unnatural perches and nesting/den sites for them.

Road density includes only non-government roads that are regularly maintained (gravel or hard top), not two-tracks.

\*Fence density equals total length of interior fence plus  $\frac{1}{2}$  length of perimeter fence divided by total area of ranch.

### Wildlife-Friendly Fence Design



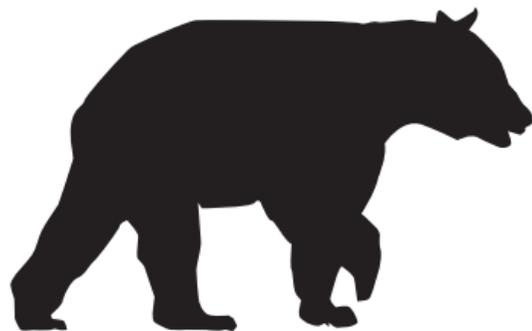
Fence diagram

## Carnivore Compatible

Goal: To allow predators to regularly use the property without habituating them to livestock depredation.

Score	Cougar	Coyote, bobcat, badger, otters, mink, weasels	Wolf	Bear	Conditions
0					Scores 1 - 7 requirements: Non-lethal deterrents (e.g., human presence, guard dogs, herding methods, scare devices and, for small enclosed areas, electric fence/fladry) may be used to keep predators away from immediate vicinity of livestock, but not from property.  <i>Additional conditions below</i>
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
Result (weight)	(2x)	(1x)	(3x)	(2x)	Ave. weighted score =

- No tolerance
- Tolerated, but unlikely to be present
- Ranch in range but not in known territory
- Photos/sign of use
- Ranch overlaps resident territory
- Hibernation &/or denning with young present



**Conditions continued** – Livestock depredation must be reported and confirmed within 24 hrs. Non-lethal deterrents must be tried first to deter further depredation, including while predator is in proximity of, testing or chasing livestock. If while at least one non-lethal deterrent is in regular use, four qualifying incidents of depredation have occurred within 6 months, lethal measures or translocation of problem animal(s) may be used with prior approval.

Shooting or other lethal measures okay if predator caught in act of biting or killing livestock or guard animals if no baiting or other attractant was used, if reasonable means were taken to preserve evidence (including the carcass) and if reported within 24 hours.

Conditions apply to extent allowed by state and federal laws.

## G6

**Species of Concern Goal:** To accommodate management of endangered, threatened and other species of concern.

Score	Sage grouse	Swift fox	Raptor nesting	Any SOC (not already covered)	Burrowing owl	Conditions
0	No conservation measures taken					See below.
1	Remove perch poles					
2	Moderate grazing	Conduct survey				
3	No/light grazing in riparian areas					
4		No trapping of predators		Evidence of active use by 1-3 species		
5	Reduce disturbance near lek	Photos of foxes				
6	No harvest	Ranch overlaps resident fox territory			Owl home range on ranch	
7	Increasing lek & brood counts	Release translocated foxes on your ranch		Evidence of active use by 4 or more	Extraordinary conservation measures taken	
Result (weight)			(x # of nests)			Ave. weighted score =

**Conditions: Priority for species listed as endangered, threatened or candidates under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.**

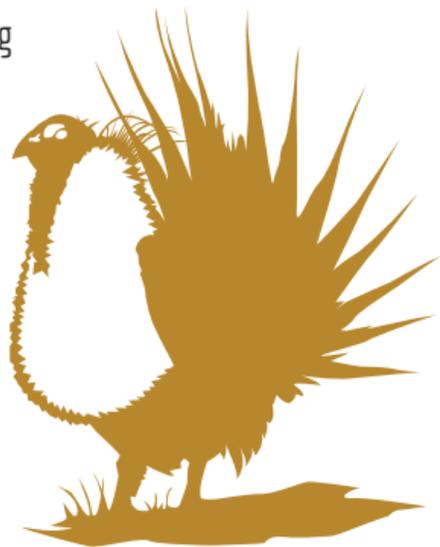
**“Birds of conservation concern” under U.S. Migratory Bird Management Act or as “species of concern” by MTFWP (or other state agency as appropriate) may deserve special attention as well.**

APR priority species - pronghorn, sage grouse, bobcat, prairie dog, ferret, deer, cougar, elk.

Montana species of concern - swift fox, prairie dog, sage grouse, golden eagle, burrowing owl, ferruginous hawk, peregrine falcon, mountain plover, loggerhead shrike, long bill curlew, white pelican, select identifiable breeding birds, great blue heron, American bittern, white-faced ibis, sharp-tailed grouse.

Montana species in need of monitoring - porcupine, short ear owl, screech owls, jackrabbit, badger, river otter.

Federally listed species - black-footed ferret, mountain plover, piping plover, grizzly bear.



## Ranch Size Goal: To encourage management at large geographic scales.

Score	Number of properties with contiguous acres	Contiguous acres enrolled	Conditions
0	0	<1	Properties with contiguous acres of enrolled prairie may be in any configuration as long as the enrolled land of each property abuts the enrolled land of at least one other property.
1	1	1-10	
2	2	10-20	
3	3	20-40	
4	4	40-60	
5	5	60-80	
6	6	80-100	
7	≥7	>100	
Result (weight)			Ave. weighted score =

## Final Score Calculation

	Score	Weight	Score x weight	Notes
1 - No Tilling		1		
2 - Herbivore Abundance		3		
3 - Natural Hydrology		2		
4 - Landscape Connection		2		
5 - Carnivore Compatible		3		
6 - Species of Concern		3		
7 - Ranch Size		3		
Result (weight)				

## Notes



[wildskybeef.org](http://wildskybeef.org)