

## **Land Use & Balanced Development: A Shared Global Challenge**

*Provided by the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (USRSB) in recognition of the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP).*

by Karley Williams

Across global grazing operations, day-to-day decisions revolve around forage conditions, water availability, weather, herd health, market variability, and more. With so much attention required on the ground, it can be easy to miss some of the broader forces shaping the future of working lands.

As part of the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP), February's theme focuses on land use and balanced development, which accounts for producer livelihoods, ecosystem health, and long-term land function, each connecting pastoralists worldwide.

### **The Global Perspective**

Around the world, ranchers and pastoralists are navigating increasing pressure on the land that sustains their livelihoods and their communities. Depending on geography, governance, history, or any other number of factors, land access and land security look different.

In many lower-middle income regions, securing rights to land means establishing land tenure, protecting common property resources, and maintaining mobility for livestock, sometimes across national borders. For pastoralists who rely on seasonal movement and shared grazing systems, land security is essential to both food production and community well-being.

In upper-middle income regions, the challenge often shifts from access to management and retention. Producers must navigate a complex mix of public land leasing and private land ownership, regulatory frameworks, and social pressures. Across all regions, however, pastoralists share a common concern – how to ensure progress continues in ways that support our grazinglands.

### **Shared Challenge, Different Expression**

While the context varies, the pressure on land is universal. The landscapes we rely on are increasingly shaped by competing land uses. This is where the global IYRP conversation meets a distinctly American reality.

For the U.S., grazingland conversion has emerged as one of the most significant challenges tied to securing land and achieving balanced development. It occurs when grazing lands are converted to other uses, often permanently.

Key drivers include:

- Conversion of native grazing lands to cropland or other non-grazing uses (e.g., recreation, hunting leases, etc.)
- Woody encroachment (i.e., afforestation of invasive tree species due to absentee land ownership, mismanaged lands, etc.)
- Residential and commercial development
- Transportation and energy infrastructure
- Renewable energy development (e.g., wind and solar)

Each of these changes may be driven by legitimate societal needs. Taken together, however, they create combined pressure on grazing landscapes and the producers who depend on them.

### **Understanding the Scale**

According to the [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#), in the last 10 years alone, the U.S. has lost more than 50 million acres of grasslands.

When viewed at scale, grazingland conversion is not a collection of isolated decisions. It is a trend with long-term implications for grazing operations, wildlife habitat, carbon storage, and rural communities. Once grazinglands are converted, they are rarely converted back to their grazing function.

This is particularly important to note because not all acres are interchangeable. Grazinglands provide ecosystem services that are difficult, if not impossible, to replace. They support biodiversity, protect soil and water resources, store carbon, and depend on cattle and other grazing animals to remain healthy.

### **Balanced Development Is the Goal**

As we move forward, the goal for us all is simple: intentional, balanced planning, with development that recognizes the value of working lands and the people who steward them.

Balanced development means:

- Considering long-term land function over short-term gains
- Planning development projects in ways that minimize fragmentation of grazinglands
- Ensuring pastoralists and ranchers are at the forefront of land-use conversations

Throughout IYRP, topics like this will continue to connect local management decisions with global priorities. Balanced development isn't about choosing between progress and grazing. It's about making room for both.

### **Looking Ahead**

The February IYRP theme highlights a shared global concern of how to move forward without leaving pastoral systems and healthy rangelands behind. For American ranchers, grazingland conversion is one of the most visible expressions of that challenge.

In support of this, the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (USRSB) has launched the Grazingland Conversion Task Force, which exists to unify stakeholders across the U.S. beef supply chain around a shared understanding of grazingland conversion and to collaboratively develop strategies that support reduce conversion. If you're interested in learning more, contact Samantha Werth, Executive Director of USRSB, at [swerth@beef.org](mailto:swerth@beef.org).