



## **Beyond Carbon: How Partnerships Are Expanding the Conversation Around Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services**

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

by Grace Vehige

This past May, the theme of the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP), “Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services,” highlighted the many ways grazing lands contribute to healthy and productive landscapes. With a large percent of the population unconvinced that sustainable ranching and wildlife are compatible, or that sustainably used rangelands benefit ecosystem services, this theme focuses attention on exactly that.

During a panel discussion at the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef’s annual General Assembly Meeting in Tampa earlier this spring, ranchers, sustainability leaders, technology providers, and supply chain partners gathered to discuss how collaborative projects are helping producers implement practices that support a range of outcomes from soil health and grazing management to biodiversity, water management, and operational resilience.

While carbon has often been the focus of many sustainability discussions, these panelists emphasized that the conversation is expanding beyond that.

### **Looking Beyond a Single Outcome**

As sustainability initiatives continue to evolve, many organizations are exploring how grazing management and land stewardship contribute to multiple ecosystem outcomes.

During the discussion in Tampa, panelists highlighted growing interest in measuring and understanding benefits that extend beyond carbon alone.

An audience member asked whether existing sustainability programs could support outcomes such as biodiversity and water alongside carbon goals. The response reflected a broader shift occurring across the industry.

“We’re hearing, just even in the last six months, more and more desire for additional metrics,” said moderator Campbell Mauchan of AgriWebb.

Echoing that point, Drew Slattery with AgSpire added that “many programs may already be collecting information that can help build toward credible ecosystem outcomes.”

“Instead of asking for more data or additional data, let’s look at what is already being collected and what additional information we can get from that,” Slattery said.

The discussion highlighted an emerging perspective that ecosystem services are interconnected, and that information collected for one purpose may help inform others.

### **Partnerships Create Opportunities**

A central theme throughout the panel was that meaningful progress requires collaboration across the beef value chain.

“There’s not a single stage of the beef supply chain that can solve the sustainability question all by itself,” Mauchan said.

With that note serving as their conversation’s foundation, panelists highlighted collaborative programs that connect producers with retailers, foodservice companies, technical experts and service providers. These initiatives are designed to support practice changes at the ranch level by pairing financial incentives with technical assistance, helping producers implement management approaches that can deliver positive environmental and operational outcomes.

Those investments can help reduce barriers to adoption while supporting improvements that producers may already want to make on their operations.

### **Supporting Producers Through Change**

For producers in particular, implementing new practices often requires time, infrastructure, and financial resources – all of which seem to be running in low supply.

South Dakota rancher Mitch Pederson shared how partnerships helped him transition land from row crop production back into perennial pasture and grazing systems.

“Without those partnerships, I wouldn’t be up here being able to say that I have a cow-calf operation back home,” Pederson said.

He shared that, in his experience, financial support can help producers navigate the early stages of change, particularly when establishing pasture, fencing, water systems, or other infrastructure improvements.

“The monetary incentive and technical assistance is there and to know that you’re going to be supported while things get established or while you transition that farm or that piece of property – that for me was huge,” he said.

Panelists stressed that financial incentives are only part of the equation, and that technical assistance, education, and access to trusted advisors play an important role in helping producers make decisions that fit their operations and landscapes.

### **Learning From the Land**

Steve Wooten, of Beatty Canyon Ranch in Colorado, described how participation in sustainability projects has created opportunities to better understand what is happening beneath the soil surface.

“What really encouraged me to get into [measuring resources] was the opportunity for the first time to have an outside look at what’s underneath the surface of the ground,” Wooten said.

Through soil sampling and monitoring efforts, he has gained insights into how management practices may be influencing conditions below ground.

"We thought we were pretty good managers," Wooten said. "Grass grows pretty good, responds quick when we finally get some rain, but what's underneath the surface?"

For Wooten, those are answers he was able to uncover, and because of that, the value of participation extends beyond his own operation.

"We're willing to share data so that other producers can take whatever we've found to success and use it," he said. "We're not trying to keep a secret. We're trying to give messages out."

#### Data as a Tool for Better Decisions

Although data collection is often associated with sustainability programs, panelists emphasized that data should support decision-making rather than become the objective itself.

"I haven't met many ranchers that are desperate to talk about more data," Mauchan said. "They want more insights; they want more reports. They want to have something that's going to help them make a better decision, allowing them to push the ranch forward."

That perspective resonated throughout the discussion.

As organizations explore ways to better understand biodiversity, water, carbon, and other ecosystem outcomes, panelists stressed the importance of minimizing administrative burdens while maximizing the value producers receive from the information collected.

#### **The Importance of Producer-to-Producer Learning**

The panel concluded with a discussion about what motivates producers to participate in new programs.

For both Pederson and Wooten, trust and peer-to-peer learning remain essential. Pederson shared an example of meeting with a small group of ranchers who quickly expanded interest among neighboring producers.

"The desire is there," he said. "They just had to hear it from somebody they trust and who had a good experience in the program."

Wooten agreed, noting that producers often learn best from one another's experiences.

"If there's an opening for somebody to get in the program and be a part of it, I would encourage it," he said.

#### **Looking Ahead**

The May IYRP theme highlights the importance of biodiversity and ecosystem services across the world's rangelands.

The USRSB panel discussion reinforced that achieving these outcomes is not the responsibility of any single organization or segment of the supply chain. Instead, progress depends on collaboration, shared learning, and practical solutions that work for producers.

As interest grows in understanding outcomes related to biodiversity, water, soil health, and resilience, partnerships across the beef value chain remain vital. It's a really exciting time to encourage

participation and learning across the supply chain to contribute to a broader understanding of how grazing lands support both production and healthy ecosystems.

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AgSpire designs and implements agricultural sustainability programs that connect corporate sustainability targets to practical, measurable on-farm outcomes. The company pairs financial incentives with hands-on technical support to drive adoption that improves farm efficiency, producer profitability, and supply chain resiliency. Learn more at [agspire.com](https://agspire.com).

AgriWebb provides livestock producers with practical digital tools that simplify recordkeeping, improve operational visibility, and support data-driven decision-making on farm and ranch operations. By combining technology with producer-focused support, AgriWebb helps operations track performance, streamline workflows, and capture meaningful data that supports business, sustainability, and supply chain goals. Learn more at [AgriWebb.com](https://AgriWebb.com).