

NORTH DAKOTA CLIMATE INITIATIVE – SECTOR STORY 6

Sowing Sustainability – The North Dakota Outdoor Heritage Fund

North Dakota looks a little different than most states. As a prairie state, it naturally has fewer trees with much of its wildlife adapted to grasslands. As the North Dakota Department of Environmental Quality (NDDEQ) develops the state's first sustainability plan, partners in agriculture, ranching and outdoor recreation are working together to ensure North Dakota's unique ecosystems thrive for future generations.

This means expanding forested lands AND preserving prairie lands where trees are naturally sparse.

Trees and forests are an essential resource as they provide watershed protection, wildlife habitats, recreational opportunities and protection for crops, soil and livestock. Forest ecosystems store carbon, improve health and nutrition, provide key resources that contribute to people's livelihoods, and protect communities from the impacts of climate change. In North Dakota planting trees in unnatural locations can also endanger grassland nesting bird habitats and allow predators like raptors, crows and skunks to overpopulate. Research shows that grassland animals will avoid an entire habitat once the woody cover is greater than 50%. Increasing grasslands *and* forested areas, while maintaining a balance to support local wildlife, helps to create a sustainable future for North Dakota.

One effort successfully balancing the needs of North Dakota's ecosystem is the North Dakota Outdoor Heritage Fund. It was established in 2013 as a multi-million-dollar program to provide grants to state agencies, tribal governments, political subdivisions, and nonprofit organizations. The fund prioritizes projects that enhance conservation practices in the state by achieving one or more of the following directives:

- Expands access to private and public lands and enhances fish or wildlife habitats for sportsmen.
- Improves, maintains and restores water quality, soil conditions, plant diversity, animal systems, and supports other stewardship practices to enhance farming and ranching.
- Develops, enhances, conserves and restores wildlife and fish habitat on private and public lands.

- Conserves natural areas and creates areas for recreation by establishing and developing parks.

The fund is supported by tax revenue from oil and gas production, up to \$40 million every two years. To maximize the utilization and impact of this fund, several foundations and organizations are championing causes that meet the requirements of specific directives.

- The [Audubon Great Plains Prairie Management Program](#) works to increase the resiliency and biodiversity of existing grassland acres. In 2024 it received \$635,000 in financial assistance for landowners looking to improve roughly 7,500 acres of grassland habitat.
- The [North Dakota Petroleum Foundation](#)'s Planting for the Future program works to help private landowners forest their lands. Currently, roughly 70% of North Dakota is privately owned land. The foundation works closely with industry, wildlife groups, private landowners and the Outdoor Heritage Fund to get applications approved and put into action. In 2024 the foundation was awarded \$220,177 through the fund to plant 340,000 trees across North Dakota.
- The [North Dakota Natural Resources Trust for Working Grasslands Partnership](#) provides the resources needed to make livestock operations more sustainable and profitable. It received \$762,500 in 2024 to help landowners transition Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres for grazing.

To apply for an Outdoor Heritage Fund Grant, please visit this link: [Outdoor Heritage Fund-Applicant Information | North Dakota Industrial Commission](#). For any questions, please reach out to the grant program via email at NDICGrants@nd.gov.

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