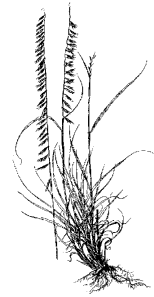


THE Quivira Coalition's BULLETIN

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The mission of The Quivira Coalition is to foster ecological, economic and social health on westward landscapes through education, innovation collaboration and progressive public and private land stewardship.

The Rowe Mesa Grassbank: A Model of Innovative Stewardship

[Editor's note: In November 2004, The Conservation Fund transferred the Rowe Mesa Grassbank to The Quivira Coalition]

In 1997, author and conservation leader Bill deBuys had an idea – and a problem.

The idea was a novel one: to get natural fire back on the land using the tool of a Grassbank – to be located on a stretch of national forest land on top of Rowe Mesa, forty miles east of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

His inspiration came from the Gray Ranch, part of the Malpai Borderlands Group in southwestern New Mexico, which offered its grass to ranchers in exchange for conservation easements on their home property. DeBuys' idea was to exchange the grass of an unstocked federal grazing allotment for restoration action – thinning and prescribed burning – on the home allotment. Cattle would come to the Grassbank for a period of time, thus reducing conflicts between



(Left) Jerry Elson, of the Santa Fe National Forest, and Bill deBuys (Right) point out the location of the Grassbank in this 1997 photo. Photo by Don Usner.

livestock and restoration work.

It was a quid pro quo: an exchange of forage for conservation. Everyone won, deBuys thought. Ranchers could have their grass and eat it too, the Forest Service had a bottleneck removed for restoration activities, and conservationists received, well, conservation.

The problem was his idea almost never became a reality. Opponents lined up like at a shooting gallery. Forest Guardians, an environmental group dedicated to ending public lands ranching, objected officially. The New Mexico Cattlegrowers' Association protested too. Even the Lieutenant Governor of New Mexico at the time opposed the concept and worked aggressively, according to deBuys, to derail the project. Many others were lukewarm to the idea, including the region's mainstream environmental organizations.

The only partners that stood steadfastly with

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Meet the Grassbank Team



There would be no Grassbank for The Quivira Coalition without the outstanding creativity, patience, and hard work of our Rowe Mesa team: Craig Conley, Catherine Baca, and Michael Moon. Learn more about these fine folks starting on page 6.

Special Thanks!

The Rowe Mesa Grassbank project would not be possible without the continuing financial support of:

- The US Forest Service
- The Thaw Charitable Foundation
- The McCune Foundation
- The Ford Foundation
- The Conservation Fund

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The rolling landscape of the Rowe Mesa Grassbank

Written by Melissa Savage, Four Corners Institute

The rolling landscape of the Rowe Mesa Grassbank is covered with a patchwork of forests and grasslands. These forests, scattered large ponderosa pines and a pinyon pine and juniper woodland, have provided fuelwood and timber for local residents and habitat for wildlife for centuries. Past human uses, however, have changed the structure and function of the forests on the mesa, particularly through the suppression of the low-intensity fires that once burned regularly on the forest floor. Active fire suppression and overgrazing meant that surface fires no longer removed the abundant small trees that regenerated in the understory, and forest grew so dense that even grasses disappeared under the forest canopy. Such thickets now support fast-moving wildfires that burn into the tree crowns and that burn hot.

In 2001 the U.S. Congress funded a program for reducing the threat of destructive crown fires and for restoring the health of forests in New Mexico. The Collaborative Forest Restoration Program (CFRP) awards grants to groups of collaborating partners to restore forests and benefit local communities. Ecological benefits include conserving large and old trees, reestablishing a forest structure that supports native wildlife, fostering a healthy grass and forb understory, and stabilizing soils. Socioeconomic benefits include providing jobs in forest restoration, offering free firewood, youth crew training, and educational opportunities for local schoolchildren.

The Grass Bank is fortunately home to two of the CFRP projects. The current project was awarded to the Conservation Fund, and partners in both projects include, in addition, Four Corners Institute, the Quivira Coalition, Forest Guild, and the U.S. Forest Service.

Thinning treatments have now been completed on the first project, and the Forest Service just burned the slash in a cool prescribed fire. The 300 acre site now hosts a scattered ponderosa pine woodland with large pinyon pines and recovering grasses. It resembles the fabled “park-like” landscape reported in sketches and descriptions of early settlers and military expeditions.

The removal of the downed small-diameter trees would not have been possible without the assistance of local community residents, who used pickups and chain saws to remove fuelwood.

A second CFRP forest restoration project has now begun just to the north of the completed project.



Controlled burn following thinning treatment on the Ortiz Pasture.

This time, the acreage to be treated is much larger, 910 acres. As in the first project, free fuelwood will be available for collection in the fall of the next three years. The trees will be cut down by a crew, but must be cut into fuelwood lengths for removal.

These two forest restoration projects, located at the heart of the Grassbank, with luck, will serve as an anchor and a model for strategic placement of restoration projects across the Rowe Mesa landscape.

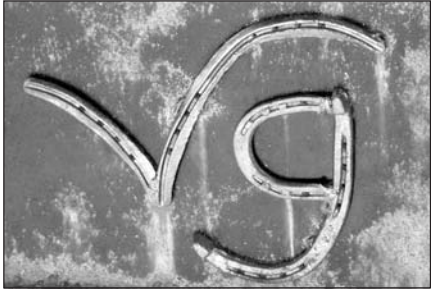
Grassbank Internship Yields Results

In 2004, Quivira hosted its first summer intern for the Grassbank. The internship was funded by the Collaborative Forest Restoration Program (CFRP). As a component of the multi-party monitoring of the CFRP project, Armando Nieto, a masters degree student in Integrated Resource Management from Colorado State University, conducted telephone interviews of two groups of stakeholders—grazing permittees and free-use-permit fuelwood gatherers—to determine their perceptions of the treatment's impact: on forest and rangeland health; on fire threat in the wildland-urban interface; and on the participants' livelihoods.

The results clearly showed that the Rowe Mesa CFRP project succeeded in changing perspectives and informing the stewardship ethic of public land users in the community. The majority of respondents recognized the role of restoration treatments in the health of the ecosystem and in the maintenance of their livelihoods, and expressed strong support for further treatments with continuing community involvement. As a collaborative undertaking on public lands, the Rowe Mesa Grass Bank is committed to serving as a model for similar efforts on other public lands. The involvement of multiple user-groups in its activities is imperative both for achieving the goals of the Grassbank, and for replicating its success elsewhere.

Rowe Mesa Grassbank

(con't from page 1)



Our allotment on Rowe Mesa is named Valle Grande.

deBuys were the Forest Service, the Northern New Mexico Stockman's Association, and the Cooperative Extension Service.

It was touch-and-go until both the conservative Albuquerque Journal and the liberal Santa Fe New Mexican editorialized in favor of the Grassbank. The opposition faded away, but the challenges were just beginning.

Why was there so much opposition to an idea that seemed to benefit all sides? Part of the answer can be found in the standard 'taking sides' over livestock grazing on public land – what some have called the "Conflict Industry." Part of it was resistance to the idea of a national environmental group – The Conservation Fund in this case – getting into the ranching business.

But a lot of the opposition was due to the novelty of the Grassbank idea. It was new, it was different, it was collaborative, it was proactive, and it solved problems.

Fortunately, deBuys, with strong support from The Conservation Fund and the other Grassbank partners, prevailed over the skeptics. Eight years later, the Grassbank has not only proved itself to be a useful tool, but it has, in turn, been an inspiration for other organizations and other Grassbanks around the West.

What Is a Grassbank?

A Grassbank is defined as a physical place, as well as a voluntary collaborative process, where forage is exchanged for one or more conservation benefits on neighboring or associated lands.

How that exchange takes place and what specific conservation benefits accrue is determined by the Grassbank participants. On the Rowe Mesa Grassbank, the exchange is grass for prescribed fire and thinning. Other Grassbanks leverage grass into protecting wildlife habitat, restoring watersheds, and maintaining "weed-free" zones. Whatever the benefit, both sides of the exchange must be strong for a Grassbank to work properly.

Grassbanks are not fancy 'swing' allotments, however – where cattle are traditionally moved in order to provide relief from overgrazing, drought or other management complications. Instead, they provide proactive, and long-lasting, conservation benefit to land and people.

But Grassbanks are more than just grass and trees. On Rowe Mesa, for example, Bill deBuys set three overarching goals for the Grassbank, in his words:

- 1) To improve the ecological health of public grazing lands for the benefit of all creatures dependent on them – from juncos to jackrabbits and curlews to cowboys
- 2) To strengthen the economic and environmental foundation of northern New Mexico's ranching tradition, which is arguably the oldest in the nation; and
- 3) To show that ranchers, conservationists, and agency personnel can work together for the good of the land and the people who depend on it.

Grassbanks are a powerful tool because they can integrate environmental and economic goals, operate in harmony with local social and cultural traditions, encourage shared ownership, and meet environmental justice concerns. Best of all, perhaps, is a Grassbank's flexibility.

"Our goal is to be consistently and continually adaptive," wrote deBuys. "If the land is changing, so must we. Our fundamental challenge is shared equally by both the conservation and ranching communities: how to respond to the constant dynamism of the lands upon which we all depend."

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The National Grassbank Network

An informal network of conservationists, ranchers, federal land managers and others with an interest in Grassbanks has come together into the National Grassbank Network. They share experiences, ideas, and resources as the Grassbank movement grows. For more information visit the web site at: www.grassbank.net

Many thanks go to Michael Dechter and Stephanie Gripe of the US Forest Service for coordinating this new project.

Rowe Mesa Grassbank

(con't from page 3)

How It Began

With his partners and goals in place, deBuys and his colleagues at The Conservation Fund raised the funds necessary to purchase 240 acres of deeded land on top of Rowe Mesa. The property came with a federal grazing permit for 36,000 acres of national forest land – and no cattle.

Rather than stock the ranch with Conservation Fund cattle (they didn't own any), the Conservation Fund and its partners, including the Forest Service, crafted an agreement under which the grass of the Valle Grande allotment would be offered as a 'bank' to national forest permittees in northern New Mexico in exchange for restoration work on the home ground – principally forest thinning and prescribed fire.

"In the case of northern New Mexico, we believe that the best hope for ecologically sound, fire-wise stewardship of public land lies within the ranching community," deBuys wrote. "If ranchers, working with environmentalists, become advocates for prescribed burns, wildfires, and related treatments, political leaders and public agencies will respond accordingly – to the lasting benefit of the land."



Burning slash from thinning.



Trees remain intact following prescribed burn.



Unloading cattle from Tio Gordito for our first grazing season.

Grassbanks are also a living exercise in the 'radical center' – where people of diverse backgrounds can meet and work effectively together.

"For ranchers," deBuys wrote, "this means accepting a higher standard of environmental performance; for environmentalists, it means approaching conservation by working constructively with the people who occupy and use the land; for bureaucrats, it means focusing on producing tangible results, not merely defending procedure, and for all it means the sharing of authority and responsibility."

In northern New Mexico, as in most western forests, historic fire suppression and overgrazing by livestock has led to dense, unhealthy forest conditions, often resulting in catastrophic wildfires. One researcher has determined that due to rapid tree growth we are losing upland grass cover at a rate of over 1% per year to tree encroachment. This declining productivity has led to conflicts between cattle, wildlife, recreational users, and restoration activities.

DeBuys thought a Grassbank would relieve some of this stress by encouraging those who wish to improve the health of large landscapes to work constructively with the people who occupy and use those landscapes.

How It Works

But how does a Grassbank work? After surviving the usual rocky start, Bill and his partners found a formula.

From their experience, for the Rowe Mesa Grassbank to run smoothly, all five 'cylinders' of its engine need to function properly: the Steering Committee; strong participation from permittees; ranch operations; finances; and the exchange.

Steering Committee. The Rowe Mesa Grassbank has four partners on its Steering Committee: the US Forest Service, the Northern New Mexico Stockman's Association, the New Mexico Cooperative Extension Service, and The Quivira Coalition (which has re-

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Rowe Mesa Grassbank

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placed the Conservation Fund). Although various roles for each partner are spelled out in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), the principle job of the Committee is to review applications to the Grassbank from grazing associations around the region and to make recommendations to the Supervisor of the Santa Fe National Forest.

This collaborative decision-making is the key to the Grassbank's success. Not only are a diversity of ideas brought to the table and discussed, but trust is built as relationships develop and respect grows.

Participation. Without clients – the ranchers – there would be no Grassbank. Fortunately, support has been very strong. To apply, groups of grazing permittees work with their local USFS Ranger District. To be ranked high, an application should

- (1) have a detailed restoration plan in place;
- (2) demonstrate significant ecological need;
- (3) have the NEPA requirements completed, and;
- (4) have a viable monitoring plan. If accepted, a

grazing group's cattle (the Grassbank tries to take the whole bunch) will likely graze on the Grassbank for one or more seasons.

Running the Ranch. When the cattle come to the Grassbank they are watched over by a full-time ranch manager. In addition to the usual duties of fixing fence and repairing the 30-miles of pipeline (there's only one well!), he must herd the animals through multiple pastures, work with the permittees when they visit, implement an animal health program, coordinate activities with the Forest Service, help

monitor, and take many, many notes.

Finances. Since the Grassbank does not own any cattle, it loses THE source of financial capital that

Continued on page 8

Rowe Mesa Grassbank

By the numbers:

- Deeded land: 240 acres
- Public land: 36,000 acres
- Number of wells: one
- Miles of pipeline: 30
- AUMS: 320
- Number of cattle since 1998: 1800
- Number of permittees: 42
- Number of grazing associations: 7
- Number of national forests: 2

Conservation Treatments

- Rx fire: 5590 acres
- Hand thinning ponderosa or mixed conifer forest: 4020 acres
- Brush/Tree removal: 550 acres
- Riparian fencing: 5 miles
- Road improvements: 5 miles
- Trail improvements: 35 miles
- Association herder: 2 seasons
- Water development: 6
- Wetland/Playa projects: 4
- Rest: 14.5 years

Heart Mountain Grassbank, Cody, Wyoming

(The Nature Conservancy)

Located a few miles north of Cody, Wyoming, the 15,000-acre Heart Mountain Ranch supports one of the greatest concentrations of rare plants ever discovered on private property in the state. It also came with 600 acres of irrigated pasture land. The Nature Conservancy, which purchased the property in 2001 to protect its biodiversity, originally planned to sell this pasture land in order to pay off the land debt. Then they changed their minds.

“As we talked to landowners in the area, we realized that one of the main impediments to range restoration projects on federal land was the lack of available alternate forage,” said Maria Sonnett, ranch director. “We realized that we had a good opportunity by making this grass available for these projects. We talked about Grassbanking as a great way to do community-based conservation...five years later we’re still going strong!”

To date, the Heart Mountain Grassbank has provided grazing to local ranching families in support of three restoration projects: Sheep Mountain elk winter range rest; Bald Ridge fuel reductions burn; and Sage Creek watershed restoration. This year, ranchers who wish to implement conservation on their private and state lands will be included in the scope of the Grassbank.

“Grazing can even benefit natural plant communities and wildlife. In fact, cattle fulfill the role buffalo once played in this ecosystem, helping maintain many native plants that evolved in response to them.” – Heart Mountain web site

To learn more: <http://nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/states/wyoming>

Craig Conley, Director of the Grassbank

Craig says the Grassbank is his dream job. "If I could, I'd do it for free," he said, "because it combines all my interests – range ecology, livestock, managing land, restoration, and people. It doesn't get much better than this."

Of course, he feels less enthusiastic some days when the real world of managing land and people is more practice than theory. Despite occasional frustration, however, Craig remains busily optimistic. "You learn by doing," he said with a smile, "and I'm learning a lot on the Grassbank, to say the least."

Craig's family moved to Santa Fe from Texas when he was two. His father, who was a labor negotiator, bought a small ranch near Lindrith and raised Welsh mountain ponies. "Dad was great at raising them," recalled Craig, "but poor at selling them. Pretty soon we had too many." Days spent on the ranch gave Craig a lifelong land management itch.

After high school, Craig embarked on an educational odyssey that carried him from New Mexico to California, where he completed his PhD in ecology at UC Davis in 2000. His dissertation focused on public attitudes toward land management practices and restoration, especially among ranchers, environmentalists, and public agency personnel.

"I was predestined to work for The Quivira Coalition," he says with a laugh.

After eighteen years in the wilderness of California, Craig and his family returned to Santa Fe, where he took a job with the Highway Department as the manager of its Environmental section. Meanwhile he took over the family ranch in Lindrith, which satisfied his land management itch – sort of.

"My PhD had little relevance to managing land," said Craig. "I've learned more applied ecology listening to Bill Zeedyk than through the whole PhD process."

Craig left the Highway Department after five years and struck out on his own, specializing in NEPA consultation and restoration projects. "Doing NEPA as a consultant is like poking yourself in the eye repeatedly," said Craig, "but it paid the bills."

It was his restoration work, however, that caused him to cross paths with The Quivira Coalition. He submitted a plan to fix a portion of Cordova Creek, near the Valle Vidal, to the state Environment Department just as we submitted our plan for nearby Comanche Creek. When the state asked us to roll our proposals together into one 'burrito' we began a relationship that has grown stronger and stronger over the years.

We are very pleased, and fortunate, to have Craig on our team. And if we could just get him to work for free!

Catherine Baca, Administrative Coordinator

Catherine came to us with the transfer of the Grassbank to The Quivira Coalition. For three years she worked as Bill deBuys' right-hand person, handling the multiple grants, balancing the books, struggling with various bureaucracies, invoicing, and generally being the glue that held the Grassbank together.

It's a career choice that still surprises her.

A real native of Santa Fe – her family roots go back hundreds of years – Catherine carved out a successful career in the local hospitality industry for more than twenty years. For ten years she was Director of Sales and Marketing for Rancho Encantado, a five-star resort north of town, until the owner died and the property sold.

"Running a resort and running a Grassbank are not much different," she said, with a twinkle in her

eye. "Both involve people, money, and lots of book-keeping. There is a difference, however. The frustrations are the same, but the stress is not. No one yells over here, thankfully."

After a stint with a German adventure company, Catherine accepted a part-time job with the Grassbank. "I was looking for a new challenge," she recalled. "And I found it."

Catherine's part-time responsibilities for the Grassbank have slowly increased over time – and will continue to do so. "I loved working the Annual Conference for The Quivira Coalition," she said. "I learned a lot. I look forward to all the things that are planned for the Grassbank. It's exciting and I'm very happy to be involved."

We're very happy she's involved too!

Michael Moon, Ranch Manager

Michael is the newest member of the team, having arrived from Montana only last December – right smack in the middle of the wettest winter in recorded history. The mud was so bad and the roads so impassable, that Michael and his growing family had to rent a house in Pecos, below the mesa. As of this writing, they still have not been able to move to the house we own on the Grassbank.

True to his nature, and as a seasoned ranch hand, Michael takes it all in stride.

Moving to northern New Mexico meant coming home for Michael. His grandfather was a cow boss on the large Red River Ranch, near Wagon Mound, before starting his own ranch. Michael spent a portion of every summer with his grandfather on the ranch – an experience that eventually led him to a life outdoors.

Michael grew up near Mariposa, California – outside Yosemite National Park. Both of his parents hailed from Roy, New Mexico. In college at the University of Redlands, Michael enjoyed the fruits of a liberal arts education, earning a degree that combined history, music, and the humanities. Upon graduation, he toyed briefly with the idea of becoming a lawyer.

But the lure of the West proved too strong. “My roots were on the land, despite living near small town,” he said. “I knew I had to get back to the land somehow.”

Then there was the music. An accomplished musician, Michael learned piano at five, the banjo at twelve, began composing songs in high school, and played in numerous bands, including his favorite, named the “Electric Catfish.”

He gravitated toward folk music over time, assisted by his wife, Dawn, who is also a talented musician.

In January both were invited for the first time to perform at the big Cowboy Poetry Festival in Elko, Nevada.

Michael and Dawn, who hails from Ohio, met while both were employed at a dude ranch in Colorado. They did a stint in the Peace Corps together in Ecuador – an adventure that was cut short by the birth of their first child – before moving to a working cattle ranch (which was eventually broken up into ranchettes).

Michael’s next big career move was to take over as ranch manager of the Nature Conservancy’s Matador Ranch, located southwest of Malta, Montana – not far from the Canadian border. The Matador is operated as a Grassbank.

It’s all part of Michael’s quest for life-long learning. “I love ranching, but I also like the risky edge of it,” he said, referring to his various ranch experiences. “And since I don’t own a ranch, I have to take risks on other people’s money.”

He’s happy to be back in New Mexico, and not just because of the Montana winters. “I think I’ve been trying to move here since I was three,” he says with a smile. “It’s always felt like home to me. And I like working for a nimble organization like The Quivira Coalition. I like the possibilities of this Grassbank.”

Not to mention the risk. “I want to see where the Grassbank goes,” he said. “I have a strong passion for the ranching tradition in the West, but not as a museum piece, rather as a vital and healthy part of this changing country.”

“I’d like to own my own cattle someday, but in the meantime I’m very excited to be a part of this project. I think it has tremendous potential.”

The Matador Ranch Grassbank, Malta, Montana (The Nature Conservancy)

Located near Malta, Montana (close to the Canadian border), the 60,000-acre Matador Ranch has hosted cattle from thirteen neighboring ranches. The Nature Conservancy bought the property in 2000, part of its Glaciated Plains program, to demonstrate how ranching and conservation could work hand in hand. To do this, they chose to start a Grassbank.

In exchange for lower grazing fees, the participating ranchers agree to specific conservation practices on their home ranches, including protecting prairie dog colonies and sage grouse leks, maintaining a noxious weed-free zone, and agreeing to not plow up native prairie.

“One of the criteria we use for allowing ranchers into the program is that they support biological diversity on their home ranches,” said Linda Poole, the Conservancy’s program manager. “We decided that working cooperatively with our neighbors would be the best way to achieve our conservation goals.”

“The Conservancy has built a lot of goodwill with this arrangement,” says Dale Veseth, a participating rancher in the Grassbank. To learn more: <http://nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/states/montana>

Rowe Mesa Grassbank

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Cattle grazing on Rowe Mesa in May 2005.

keeps other ranches in business. To boot, the grazing fees paid by the grazing associations to the Forest Service stay in the home districts. All of this makes the finances of running a Grassbank a first-class challenge.

The answer, so far, has been to seek the assistance of various foundations and Government agencies, including substantial and continuing financial support from the Thaw Charitable Trust, the McCune Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the US Forest Service, the EPA, and the New Mexico Environment Department, Surface Water Quality Bureau.

But grants are not forever. Which means for the model to be sustainable over the long run Grassbanks must create a new financial model too.

The Exchange. The heart of the Grassbank idea is the quid pro quo, or exchange, of forage for tangible conservation benefit. In other Grassbanks around the West, the conservation benefit has included conservation easements, prairie dog habitat restoration, forest thinning, riparian recovery, and weed control. In the case of the Rowe Mesa Grassbank, the principle objective is the restoration of fire to the landscape.

The exchange, however, at times has been not as strong as possible. After the Cerro Grande Fire in 2000, for instance, a chill ran through the federal land management agencies for a while in regard to prescribed fire. Also, the slow speed of bureaucracies sometimes frustrates less patient partners. But genuine progress has been made.

And with all five 'cylinders' now operating, we expect big things for the Grassbank. The long-range plan is for the Grassbank to be transferred to the Northern New Mexico Stockman's Association. In the interim, The Quivira Coalition's plans include:

- Continue to manage the Grassbank as a successful on-the-ground pilot project



The Quivira Coalition

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- Disseminate the Grassbank idea as widely as possible across the West
- Use the Grassbank itself as an educational site for diverse interests
- Integrate practical monitoring techniques with adaptive management
- Explore the possibility of landscape-scale restoration on Rowe Mesa
- Become a laboratory for rural economic development opportunities
- Figure out how to make the economics of Grassbanks work
- Develop an internship program for local students
- Be a good neighbor

Grassbanks are increasingly seen by many as an important emerging tool for restoring ecological and economic vitality. Across the West, various versions of Grassbanks have been created, each with its own set of challenges and opportunities.

We hope you will also support this important innovation.

Written by Courtney White, The Quivira Coalition.