

South Dakota Private Lands Biologist Forum 2025: Connecting Producers & Programs Brainstorming Report

At the Fall 2025 Private Lands Biologist Forum in Oacoma, SD, on October 1, attendees participated in table discussions centered on lessons learned, successes, and challenges in connecting with landowners. Attendees included about 85 private lands biologists, and individuals involved with partner programs. A handful of landowners also participated in the conversations.

Each table was facilitated by members of the South Dakota Grasslands Initiative's Connecting Grassland Producers & Programs Workgroup, along with other volunteers. Tables included approximately 5–12 participants from the same region (west, central, or east South Dakota).

Below is a summary of some key ideas shared. **Statements in bold are themes that came up in many groups.**

1. Outreach Strategies

1.1 Avenues for Teaching About Programs

- Building community connections: Engaging with master naturalist groups, attending local events, visiting salebarns, and participating in farm shows with workshops.
- **Community-based events that are already happening: Crop appreciation dinners, county fairs, watershed board meetings, and conservation district board activities.**
- Inviting outreach environments: Field days, events with meals, well-known speakers, and Q&A-focused formats.
- Written outreach: Fire Marshal newsletters, *Landowner Matters*, local newspapers, mailings, listservs, magazines, FSA newsletters, and targeted mailings.

- Working with contractors: Flyers placed at gas stations, banks, grocery stores, salebarns, and courthouses; personal invitations; cold calls; and in-person visits.
- Radio outreach: Local radio segments and interviews.
- Conservation district events: Leveraging existing district gatherings and meetings.
- Social media: Re-sharing partner posts, highlighting landowner stories, and maintaining consistent visibility.

1.2 What Success Looks Like

- Visible effort: Demonstrating commitment builds trust.
- **Leveraging experienced voices: Involving respected community members increases credibility.**
- Redefining success: Even one project can spark additional work through word of mouth.
- Contractor involvement: Contractors advertising programs expand reach.
- Long-term value: Benefits may not appear immediately but accumulate over time.
- Effective written outreach: Newspaper articles, flyers, mass mailings, and conservation district letters remain impactful.
- Collaboration: Working with other agencies strengthens messaging.
- Engaging booths: Interactive displays at shows draw attention.
- Food and hospitality: Meals and refreshments increase attendance.
- Multiple touchpoints: Repetition helps landowners absorb information.
- Smaller, targeted events: More intimate settings often lead to deeper conversations.
- **Meeting producers where they are: Stock shows, grazing schools, and community events.**
- **Messaging that resonates: Framing conservation as supporting business, family, and long-term vision.**

1.3 What Doesn't Work

- Virtual events: Limited engagement and fewer opportunities for questions.
- **Competing local events: Scheduling conflicts reduce attendance, and it'sand important to consider community events and school calendars.**
- Uncertain program funding: Makes promotion difficult.
- Poor advertising: Timing and clarity matter.
- Marketing skill gaps: Staff may need support in outreach strategy.

2. Scheduling and Location Considerations

2.1 Effective Scheduling

- Seasonal timing: Winter and summer work best; fall is less effective.
- **Weekdays and weekends: Alternating accommodates diverse schedules.**
- Bus tours: Effective when producers are motivated to attend.
- **CRP signup periods: Aligning events with program cycles increases interest.**
- Weather-driven interest: Drought or other conditions can boost turnout.
- Topic-specific timing: Tailor to audience needs.
- Evening events: Particularly effective in spring and fall.

- In the summer, mid-day events can work for indoor meetings.

2.2 Effective Locations

- **Locations: Smaller communities often yield better conversations.**
 - Small venues: Fewer attendees but higher-quality engagement.
- **Meeting people where they are: Bars, grills, salebarns, and rural venues.**
- Audio considerations: Portable microphones are essential when having outdoor tours.
- Kiosks: Reach demographics unlikely to approach a staffed table.
- Community spaces: Fire halls, community centers, and rural gathering spots.
- Bus tours with refreshments: Encourage networking and discussion.

3. Topics of High Interest

3.1 Popular Topics

- Trees and forestry
- Livestock and grazing: Rotational grazing, cover crops, forage management.
- **Financially aligned practices: Money for practices producers already do.**
- **Markets and economics: Saline soils, cattle markets, profitability.**
- Technology: Drones, virtual fencing, electric fencing.
- Plant ID and soil health
- Holistic management: Balancing production, land, and finances.
- CRP, CREP, restoration
- Pollinator and garden topics
- Aquatic invasives: Zebra mussels.
- **Panels and peer learning: Landowner and partner panels.**

3.2 Understanding Audience Motivation

- Technical assistance vs. financial assistance: Many come for programs and funding first, then seek technical support.
- Selling a paradigm: Outreach often involves shifting mindsets, not just sharing information.

3.3 Topic Development

- Community conversations: Listening to recurring questions.
- Surveys: Meal-ticket surveys help gather input.
- Front-end mailings: Gauge interest before events.
- **Redefining success: Low attendance can still yield strong project leads.**
- **Clear next steps: Avoid outreach that ends without direction.**
- Reframing messaging: Focus on operational benefits, not just programs.

4. Partner Collaboration

4.1 Key Partners currently being worked with

- Conservation districts
- Pheasants Forever
- NRCS
- State agencies: Agriculture, sportsmen's groups.
- Commodity groups
- Non-conservation groups
- Implement dealers
- SDSU Extension
- Watershed groups
- Beef SD partners

4.2 Partners to Engage More

- Weed and pest boards
- Agricultural lenders
- Ranching for Profit

4.3 What Draws People to Partner Events

- Personal invitations
- Food and refreshments
- Transportation support
- Strong speakers: Especially those addressing current producer challenges.
- New or hot topics
- Social opportunities
- **Cold calling: can have mixed results. It may not bring in high numbers, but can bring the right person.**

4.4 Funding Sources

- Small partner grants
- NGOs: PF chapters, WWF, others.
- Conservation districts
- Banks: Often more willing to support meals than expected.
- Local restaurants: In-kind support.

4.5 Supporting Networking

- Events for both new and current landowners
- **Relaxed environments**
- Breaks and meals
- **Less structured workshops**
- Bingo cards and interactive tools
- Supporting existing networks: SDSHC, SDGC mentoring, WWF gatherings.
- Annual gatherings
- Handouts and business cards

5. Challenges and Needs

5.1 Challenges

- **Producer confidence in funding: Government shutdowns create doubt.**
- Perception issues: Concerns about government land grabs.
- Sponsor reputation: Big names can help or hinder.
- Tenant–landowner communication gaps
- Long-term agreements: 10-year commitments can be difficult to ensure consistent management over the period.
- **Need for more mentors: Peer stories are highly influential.**
- Disconnect across levels: Local, state, and national alignment issues.

5.2 Needs Identified

- More economic data: Costs, returns, and financial clarity.
- **More mentors: Landowners who have implemented practices.**
- Practice cost information
- Virtual roundtables: Topic-specific discussions.
- More technical content: Grass, grazing, and program cost-share details.
- **Bank involvement: Financial institutions as partners.**

6. Wins

- Unique projects: Innovative or standout efforts.
- Multi-partner collaborations: Broad coalitions create strong outcomes.
- Relationship building: Joining producers at brandings and community events strengthens trust.