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Personal opinion Chihuahua, México

I celebrate the renewed interest of the three North American countries in collaborating through the CEC to promote grassland conservation at a continental scale. As presented to the Ministers at the CEC Council by WWF (please see attached), I believe the CEC has already proven to be an effective vehicle for developing mechanisms of continental coordination aimed at the conservation and sustainable use of shared natural resources which should serve as platforms for the implementation of the CEC 2010-2015 plan.

The central grasslands, shared by Canada, Mexico and the USA, offer the CEC unique opportunities to capitalize on previous investments to effectively address the three new priority areas for the CEC:

a. Healthy communities

Many communities in the Chihuahuan Desert are suffering the result of water shortages due to the depletion of aquifers from unregulated over extraction of water used for agricultural purposes. Similarly there is a high risk of aquifer pollution related to the use of agrochemicals and excessive draw of water. Improving grasslands use can significantly help to maintain grasslands as rangeland and avoid having to sell properties and its immediate land use change towards agriculture. Meanwhile, better use of agrochemicals by intensive farmers will certainly represent improvements to health of human and the grassland ecosystem.

b. Climate Change

Up to now, grasslands have been scantily considered for their importance in terms of carbon accumulation and water recharge. Recent research, however, has helped to understand the great potential grasslands have on both accounts. Research carried out in Mexico (COLPOS and CONAFOR) has recently documented that one hectare of native grassland can accumulate 50 tons of carbon per hectare – as much as a hectare of pine-oak forest. And groundwater research at the University of Texas concludes that areas covered with grass have higher recharge values than those covered with trees.

Within the proposed CEC 2010-2015 strategic plan, grasslands offer a great opportunity for the CEC to help build the recognition of the economic value of these services, among other by policies and incentives to land owners to be developed in each country. More specifically, the three NA countries could use grasslands as a shared ecoregion in which to map accumulated carbon as part of “Exploration of potential common methodologies for gathering and analyzing carbon data.”

c. Greening the economy

As part of its Strategic objective No1. Aimed at improving private sector environmental performance in NA grasslands can serve also as a great model.

WWF is organizing a sustainable beef global forum (November 1-3, 2010), engaging Walmart and Cargill, among other global leaders from the beef industry will bring together diverse stakeholders to help advance the global beef system toward greater sustainability through open and balanced dialogue. There is a great potential for the CEC to benefit from this dialogue which shall help develop guidelines for improving the performance of the cattle industry in terms of sustainability (see attached)

Moreover, in the Chihuahuan Desert we developed the Strategy for the Conservation of Grasslands (ECOPAD), much inspired and in communication with partners from the Prairie Conservation Action Plans underway in Alberta, Manitoba and, especially, Saskatchewan. The potential to engage the cattle industry is further highlighted as last year WWF signed collaborative agreements with the National Cattlemen Association in the US and in 2005 with the Chihuahuan Regional Cattlemen Association.

Based upon this experience I think that the CEC can make great strides in addressing its three strategic priorities for 2010-2015, by focusing in grasslands and we much welcome such an approach.