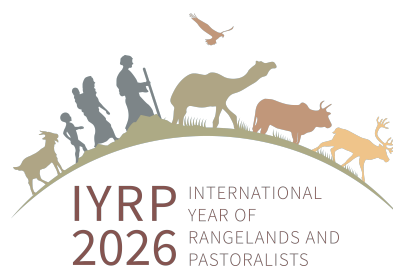


Jim O'Rourke led the way to the declaration of IYRP 2026

The sudden death of Jim O'Rourke in his 82nd year is an overwhelming loss for the alliance promoting the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP). Already at the 2008 Joint International Grassland Congress and International Grassland Congress (IRC/IGC) in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, China, Jim – then President of the IRC Continuing Committee – initiated discussions about how to inform the world about the importance of rangelands and the people who use them. He continued to promote this idea in the Society for Range Management (SRM) meetings in the USA and at IRC, IGC and other events and conferences around the world.



Jim was both a man of the field and a man of policy. He recognised the great need to raise awareness about rangelands both internationally and domestically. For example, in December 2017, he lamented how in the USA there were only a handful of donors for rangelands, compared to “BIG money folks in U.S. agronomy circles”. He saw how important a United Nations (UN) designation for an IYRP would be for the USA and the world, and he put all the force of his knowledge and charm to working towards this.

By 2015, Jim had brought together a small informal group of supporters, who engaged in lively and lengthy discussions – often led by Jim – about the objectives, content and structure of such an International Year. With his keen knowledge of rangelands around the world, his years of experience living and working in Africa and his family heritage in ranching, Jim was well aware that the term “rangelands” was not often used outside of the USA and that the term “pastoralists” was largely unknown in the USA. Nevertheless, he saw these two words in the title of the International Year as crucial in building a mutual understanding and a global coalition.

In 2016, Jim and others in the IYRP core group collaborated to ensure that the United Nations Environmental Assembly (UNEA-2) in Nairobi, Kenya, passed a resolution in favour of an IYRP. The movement towards this then gained momentum. At UNEA-4 in 2019, Jim and his core group were able to pave the way for the Government of Mongolia to lead the process for an IYRP designation, which it did formally at the June 2020 meeting of the Committee on Agriculture (COAG) of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Jim worked tirelessly to ensure that the next Joint IGC/IRC in Nairobi, Kenya, planned for 2020, would bring the needed support by eminent scientists and their governments for the IYRP. He visited FAO in Rome, Italy, to make known how an IYRP designation was gaining support from pastoralists, local governments, NGOs and scientists around the world. He leveraged funds from SRM to support travel of pastoralists to attend important international meetings where they could explain how important an IYRP would be to them. The IYRP was featured in several important sessions at the IGC/IRC eventually held virtually (after postponement because of Covid-19) in 2021. Jim continued to lead the campaign, with growing intensity, until the day of celebration on 15 March 2022, when the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) formally declared that 2026 would be the IYRP.

Jim chaired the IYRP initiative from its inception until April 2022, when it was restructured to form the Global Coordinating Group for the next steps in preparing for 2026. After stepping down as global chair, he continued to be active in the Regional IYRP Support Group (RISG) in North America.

It was mainly due to Jim's incredible perseverance that the UN designation was achieved. Jim put his whole heart and know-how and stamina behind this mission. He had a huge network of colleagues who not only respected him, but also were ready to help whenever he contacted them. His communication by email was frequent and usually through very short messages – like a delighted “COOL!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” when someone sent him their latest book, report or film about rangelands and/or pastoralists. Somehow that rich deep voice, twinkle in the eye and distinctive moustache would be visible even through emails and phone calls.

Jim was our premier cheerleader inspiring all IYRP supporters to “get the message out” about the importance of rangelands and pastoralists. He will be sorely missed. On behalf of the Global Secretariat of the IYRP alliance, we express our condolences to Jim’s wife Lora and their wider family.

Maryam Niamir-Fuller, Barbara Hutchinson and Ann Waters-Bayer
for the Global Secretariat of the IYRP 2026 alliance (www.iyrp.info)

11 March 2024



Jim, Lora and family receiving the 2018 Leopold Conservation Award for their sustainable range management on RuJoDen Ranch in Colorado, owned by the O'Rourke family since 1950.

Jim in his office in Chadron State College beside a poster promoting the IGC/IRC in Nairobi, Kenya, initially set for fall 2020 but postponed to fall 2021 because of Covid-19 (Photo: Con Marshall).

