

Bringing it together



OCTOBER 2007

Photo by Bob Buman

Our Mission:

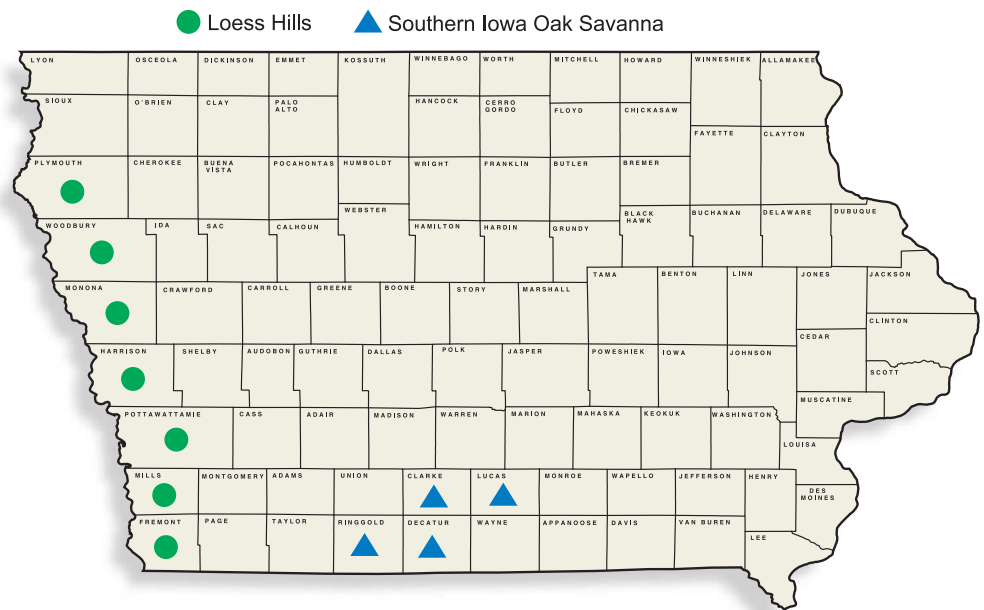
Agren, Inc. responds to agricultural and environmental challenges by providing comprehensive, integrated services to groups and individuals to positively impact our natural resources. The Agren team is dedicated to achieving client objectives through a commitment to quality and excellence.

Working with Volunteer Fire Departments to Bring Fire Back to the Prairie

Before settlement, fire was nature's way of clearing the prairie and keeping the ecosystem in balance. As white settlers moved in, they saw fire as a threat to their homes, communities and their efforts to make a living. Loss of fire on the prairie eventually led to encroachment of unwanted trees and other vegetation. Now, attitudes are changing and Agren is working to bring fire back as a valuable management tool.

In recent years, progressive landowners and conservationists have come full circle, again realizing the value of controlled fires to maintain a healthy ecosystem for all plants and animals. However, conducting fires in a countryside filled with cities, roadways, grasslands and farmsteads is a challenge. That challenge has been met by a group of volunteer firemen

Counties Targeted for VFD Prescribed Fire Project



Approximately 10 volunteer fire departments from 11 targeted counties will participate in the prescribed-fire project. Targeted counties are Plymouth, Woodbury, Monona, Harrison, Pottawattamie, Mills and Fremont in the Loess Hills, and Clarke, Lucas, Ringgold and Decatur in south-central Iowa.

(continued on inside)

Working with Volunteer Fire Departments to Bring Fire Back to the Prairie (cont.)

in the Loess Hills of western Iowa. Rather than be called out at inconvenient times to fight fires that have "escaped" from well-intentioned landowners, the Little Sioux/Grant Township Volunteer Fire Department in Smithland, IA, developed a prescribed fire service. They work with landowners to plan and conduct prescribed fire, annually burning about 600 acres in each of the past nine years.

The Smithland firefighters are now working with Agren to replicate their successful burning service in other communities across southern and western Iowa. Agren has secured a three-year Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) through the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. During the next three years, Agren and Smithland will work with selected volunteer fire departments to help them develop and promote a

prescribed fire service in their area. In doing so, the departments will not only bring ecologically-beneficial fire back to their counties, but will raise much-needed funds for their departments. As one firefighter said, "We can raise a lot more money by doing

The Smithland firefighters are now working with Agren to replicate their successful burning service in other communities across southern and western Iowa.

prescribed fires than flipping pancakes."

Right now, Agren is recruiting up to 10 volunteer departments that are interested in starting a similar service (see map of 11 project counties on page 1). Agren is partnering with several agencies as this project gets underway, including county conservation boards, The Nature Conservancy, Iowa DNR, Loess Hills Alliance, Southern Iowa Oak Savanna Alliance,

the state fire bureau, and individual fire departments from the designated areas.

Once participating fire departments are determined, each will receive both technical training in how to plan and conduct fires, plus educational materials and sessions with the Smithland firefighters about how to set up and promote their own prescribed fire service. Volunteer firefighters also will have opportunities to get hands-on field experience by working with existing prescribed-fire crews in western and southern Iowa.

Austin Sewell, who has been with Agren for nearly two years, is team leader for the project. He completed prescribed fire courses at the university level and has participated in numerous prescribed burns in Oklahoma.



Top 10

Reasons Why You Should Work With Agren

1. Tom's creativity
2. Stan's contracting knowledge
3. Jamie's multi-tasking
4. Deana's number crunching
5. Austin's grazing knowledge
6. Mary's writing expertise
7. Piper's organizational skills
8. Bob's research experience
9. Bill's field work
10. Rob's persistence

Photo on left: In recent months, two additions have been made to the Agren family. Our grazing specialist, Austin Sewell, and his wife, Val, delivered Robert Nolan into the world on March 22. Five months later, on August 14, little Mya Noelle was born to our project coordinator, Jamie Ridgely, and her husband, Cory. Mya joins big sisters Kaylynn, 6, and Jade, 3.

Absentee Landowners... Who They Are and How We Reach Them



Center for
Absentee Landowners
Conservation on Your Land

Absentee landowners comprise more than 40 percent of people who own agricultural land in the United States. Yet very little is known about their education and backgrounds, their needs, and how they prefer to receive information. Agren has taken on the challenge of remedying that lack of information, with great preliminary success.

During the past year, Agren worked with the Great Lakes Protection Fund to develop a lengthy demographic survey that was mailed to about 2,000 absentee landowners in four selected counties in New York, Michigan and Wisconsin. These areas are targeted in a three-year outreach campaign to promote conservation practices to persons who own ag land that they don't operate or live on. The surveys were the first step in gathering data on how best to accomplish that goal, and the response from landowners was far greater than expected.

In Wisconsin and Michigan, 66 percent of absentee landowners who received a survey completed it and mailed it back, while the response rate in New York was 42 percent.

"This is a wonderful research project that is long overdue", said Dr. Frank Clearfield, director of the Social Sciences Institute for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. (NRCS is one of Agren's partners in absentee landowner projects.) "Absentee landowners are often discussed from a position of abstraction, not a position of knowledge. The information we are gaining from this survey will change the way conservationists market information and services to absentee landowners for years to come."

Some of the information gained through the surveys:

- Absentee Landowners value recreation, wildlife, conservation and aesthetics on their land.
- Making an income from the land was not a high priority for the majority of respondents.
- Absentee landowners have above-average levels of education and income. Their average age was 60 years old.
- More than 70 percent of respondents have ready access to the internet, and most have high-speed internet service.

- Nearly two-thirds of respondents said they purchased their farmland, while only about a fourth of them inherited the land.
- Just over 80 percent of respondents indicated they are comfortable encouraging their farm operator to use conservation practices on the land.
- Nearly three-quarters of respondents indicated their farm was never enrolled in a state or federal conservation program. Many also indicated they were unaware of various conservation agencies as a source of information.

Based on this and much more data from the surveys, several broad conclusions can be reached about absentee landowners and how best to market conservation practices to them. (*See accompanying box.*)

Preliminary Conclusions from Absentee Landowner Surveys

1. **Conservation is important to absentee landowners and is a factor in their decision-making process about land use.**
2. **Conservation, wildlife, aesthetics and recreation are valued more than income and tradition.**
3. **Most absentee landowners depend heavily on their tenants or renters to make managerial decisions.**
4. **Levels of participation in traditional conservation programs are low, and natural resources agencies don't rank high as an important source of information for decision-making.**
5. **Traditional methods of conservation outreach may not work with such a geographically-dispersed population.**

"The survey results generated great interest when presented at conferences this past summer. Particularly impressive and promising is the large interest by absentee landowners on topics regarding conservation on their land", said Peggy Petrzela, assistant professor in the Sociology, Social Work and Anthropology Department at Utah State University. Petrzela worked with Agren to develop the surveys and analyze results.

The surveys were the first step to better understand the absentee landowner audience and how best to market conservation to them. The next step is to incorporate that information into innovative outreach campaigns in each of the targeted counties. At the end of the project, all results will be shared with conservation agencies nationwide to assist them as they work with absentee landowners to promote conservation on their land.

Get to Know... Mary Bower, Agren Communications Specialist



Mary Bower,
Communications
Specialist

After more than 20 years in the newspaper business, Mary Bower switched gears to join the Agren staff nearly two years ago. During those two years, she has been challenged by projects dealing with such issues as rural hazardous materials, prescribed fire, grassbanks and absentee landowners.

Agren is a good fit for Mary because of the company's emphasis on both agriculture and natural resources. Mary was raised on a livestock and dairy

farm in Kossuth County in north-central Iowa and earned her bachelor's degree in Communication Arts (journalism) and English from Wartburg College in Waverly. She has spent the last 25 years living on a farm in Guthrie County with her husband, Mark, and their two children, Hannah and Ross, now both in college.

As a newspaper reporter, editor and photographer for 20 years, Mary specialized on articles related to education, agriculture and general feature writing. She worked for newspapers in Carroll, Bayard and Glidden, as well as several years of freelance writing for various ag publications. Prior to joining Agren, Mary spent about two years in the public relations department at the county hospital in Guthrie County.

Coming to Agren has opened a whole new world to Mary – grant writing, project planning and implementation, marketing outreach, partners meetings and expert panels, and small business camaraderie. She's found it to be a challenging, rewarding change from the daily and weekly deadlines of newspaper work.

Outside of Agren, Mary tries to keep up with her children's lives at Northwest Missouri State University in Maryville and the University of Iowa in Iowa City. Her and Mark's most recent adventure was a 10-day vacation to Germany, touring some of the country's amazing castles, cathedrals and World War II sites, and exploring the rich agricultural region in the southeast part of the country.

