



# grazing for prairie

While resting their pastures, cattlemen help restore public grasslands

BY KAREN GRIMES PHOTOS BY CLAY SMITH

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On this 65-acre pasture on the backside of the Loess Hills State Forest, 44 heifers raise their heads as Ben Anderson drives his small red pick-up into the field. Anderson didn't have to call. Soon these young, half-wild animals run toward the truck, eager to munch on the Purina nuggets he'd brought.

"Bring back the bison" is not the modern mantra. But "bring back the prairie grass" is. And the modern bison is this herd of black Angus heifers, grazing a mixed brome grass and prairie pasture on state forest land in the loess hills.

Once covered with a sea of what residents call "red grass," in pioneer days, the loess hills wore a carpet of little and big bluestem, dotted with colorful patches of prairie forbs. Prairie fires burned encroaching trees, limiting wooded areas. Migrant bison munched prairie grasses and rubbed trunks, destroying even large trees.

Today, many hills have lost their grass cover, sporting a cap of woodlands dominated in places by unwelcome cedar trees. But an innovative effort to restore prairie partners cattle

producers with publicly owned pasture and savannah.

The first partners were Ben Anderson, who owns a cow-calf operation near Pisgah, and the DNR, which provides two pastures near the Pisgah and Little Sioux units of the Loess Hills State Forest. When the Loess Hills Alliance and Agren, Inc., a consulting firm in Carroll, advertised the new Loess Hills Grassbank program in 2006, Anderson was interested in this trade of forage for conservation.

Austin Sewell, a forage specialist from Agren, made a deal requiring Anderson to move cattle to two DNR-owned pastures, provide temporary fencing and water, pay a modest grazing rights fee, and improve his own pasture.

For Anderson, the offer was a lifesaver. Pregnant heifers had calves due in January. After four years of drought, he was feeding hay last July because the brown, dry grass crunched underfoot. Keeping cows there would require reseeding the pasture.

The DNR gains, too, says Kathy Koskovich, a DNR

*"Overgrazing changes pastures to less productive plants and can cause erosion. The Loess*





wildlife biologist who chairs the Loess Hills Alliance Stewardship committee. “We can use timely and intense grazing techniques that can be beneficial to native prairie remnants,” she says. “Grazing cattle can add heterogeneity to pasture that is attractive to many species of birds by providing a mix of plant species and heights.”

Area Forester Brent Olson has a wait-and-see attitude. “There’s definitely potential for the project,” but he’s concerned thistles may return to sites where they’ve been removed. And, Olson wants to watch how grass depths, erosion control and timing of the grazing are monitored, and how much the producers improve their grasslands.

Anderson is concerned about overgrazing and erosion, too. He knows the fragile nature of loess, saying that some call them “sugar soils” as they melt away when it rains.

He and Sewell kept the cattle spread out to prevent overgrazing, with feed bunks in the pasture middle and water and mineral blocks at either end.

Sewell pointed out a large, healthy patch of western

ragweed, *ambrosia psilostachya*, which competes better with native tall grasses under grazed conditions. “Did you know that this is the number one quail food in the United States?” he asked. It’s also important for other grassland birds.

He and Anderson pointed, too, at the fenceline where healthy sumac appeared across the fence, and only stripped, bare stems appeared in the pasture. Cattle won’t usually eat sumac, but they’ve set back this encroaching species—at least last summer.

Both knew this is the first of a three-year pilot, and their actions would affect the program’s success. Anderson said there is no down side for him, but he was concerned about getting the cattle out on time. “I didn’t have holding pens established,” he said. “And, there’s a \$500 penalty per day if they are not out.”

Anderson trained his heifers to come when he brought Purina nuggets, so he could take them home on time, where his newly rested pasture would be ready to graze this spring. 🐄

## *Hills Grassbank Project is designed to improve both private and public grasslands.”*



**FROM LEFT:** Producer Ben Anderson was eager to try grassbanking last summer after four years of drought depleted his forage. Anderson was able to improve pasture at home while his black Angus heifers moved to publicly-owned pasture to help keep woody vegetation at bay. Cat steps form on steep slopes as loess soils slip and move downhill. The Loess Hills Grass Bank combines high tech solar-powered electric fences with historic grazing to manage pastureland. Check Agren’s web site, [www.agren-inc.com](http://www.agren-inc.com), to join a Pasture Walk in August. Grazed area on the right shows how managed grazing improves grasslands by lessening woody plants.