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Grassbanks could aid in restoration

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PISGAH - When a homeowner is looking for extra cash, he goes to the local bank. When a cattle producer needs some extra forage for his herd, he now has the option to check out the Loess Hills Grassbank.

A grassbank is a system that allows cattle producers to rent public or private grasslands for their cattle while improving or restoring their own land. By using the grassbank, the producer makes use of available grazing in exchange for the opportunity to better his own land by implementing conservation practices, including prescribed fire, tree and brush removal, native grassland restoration or pasture rest.



Submitted photo - Grazing lands near Pisgah are part of a new program, the Loess Hills Grassbank, that allows cattle producers the option of using the grassbank while giving their own pastures a rest or taking action to improve them.

"Like a financial bank where you make deposits and withdrawals, a grassbank provides an alternative source of forage that landowners can withdraw in times when they need to temporarily displace their livestock for conducting conservation activities on their property," said Steph Gripne, co-chair of the Grassbank Committee of the Society for Range Management.

Woodbine-area livestock producer Ben Andersen plans to move his cattle to a grassbank near Pisgah from mid-July to mid-October. He said the dry weather has provided the incentive to try the new program.

"It's new to me, but I am hoping for a positive experience," said Andersen.

Andersen said dry conditions necessitated feeding hay to his cattle July 1. He said using the grassbank would allow his 700 acres to rest. He is also considering having a controlled burn done on the property that would further replenish his pastures.

While the concept of grassbanks is relatively new to Iowa, it has been used successfully in several western states,

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including Wyoming, Montana, Arizona and New Mexico.

Grassbank organizers hope the program will make it easier for producers to improve their land while contributing to the overall conservation of the Loess Hills.

"Grassbanking has the potential for being a grassland management tool for reaching ecological restoration and

rehabilitation goals in the Loess Hills," said Kathy Koskovich, chair of the Loess Hills Alliance Stewardship Committee. "It also can improve grassland wildlife habitat management for many plant and animal species."

Currently, the Loess Hills grassbank includes two parcels of land owned by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources near Pisgah. Additional sites will be added throughout the Loess Hills Region during the next two years.

Cattle producers in the Loess Hills region around Pisgah have been contacted about participation in the project, and plans have been finalized for this season, which ends Oct. 15. Additional information will be provided to producers later this year about demonstration activities and participation in next year's grazing season, which will begin May 15.

Several criteria are used to select cattle producers, including the value of the producer's improvements to the health of the Loess Hills; how well his management methods demonstrate good grazing practices; and how well his herd requirements meet the grazing capacity of the grassbank.

Fences and water are provided in the grassbank, but it is the responsibility of the cattle owner to regularly check both and to repair any problems. The cost to producers for using the grassbank is significantly less than renting pasture and is based on the value of the improvements the producer makes on his own land.

"A grassbank on public land can be a beneficial project because it allows the return of the ecological process of grazing to grasslands," explained Brent Olson, DNR forester. "This allows us to apply ecological grazing on public lands without all the overhead involved in owning and managing cattle. Plus, it lets us showcase - to local land owners and the general public - sustainable grazing management practices that can benefit the environment."

Andersen said he would evaluate this year's experience and decide what he'll do with his cattle next spring.

"I will see how it works out this year," said Andersen. "I may go back to using mine or may use this again and burn some of the cedars off my land next year."

The Loess Hills Grassbank is funded by a grant from the Natural Resources Conservation Service and is administered by the Loess Hills Alliance and Agren Inc., a private consulting firm based in Carroll.

Cattle producers interested in the Loess Hills Grassbank may contact Austin Sewell, grazing specialist for Agren Inc., at (712) 792-6248 or by e-mail at austin@agren-inc.com



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