

Grass banks

Where producers farm out their cattle to do needed work on their own pastures

You've heard of ready cash. Now there's ready grass. It's a deal cooked up by conservationists in which cattle producers park their cattle in someone else's pasture while they give their own pastures needed rest and renovation.

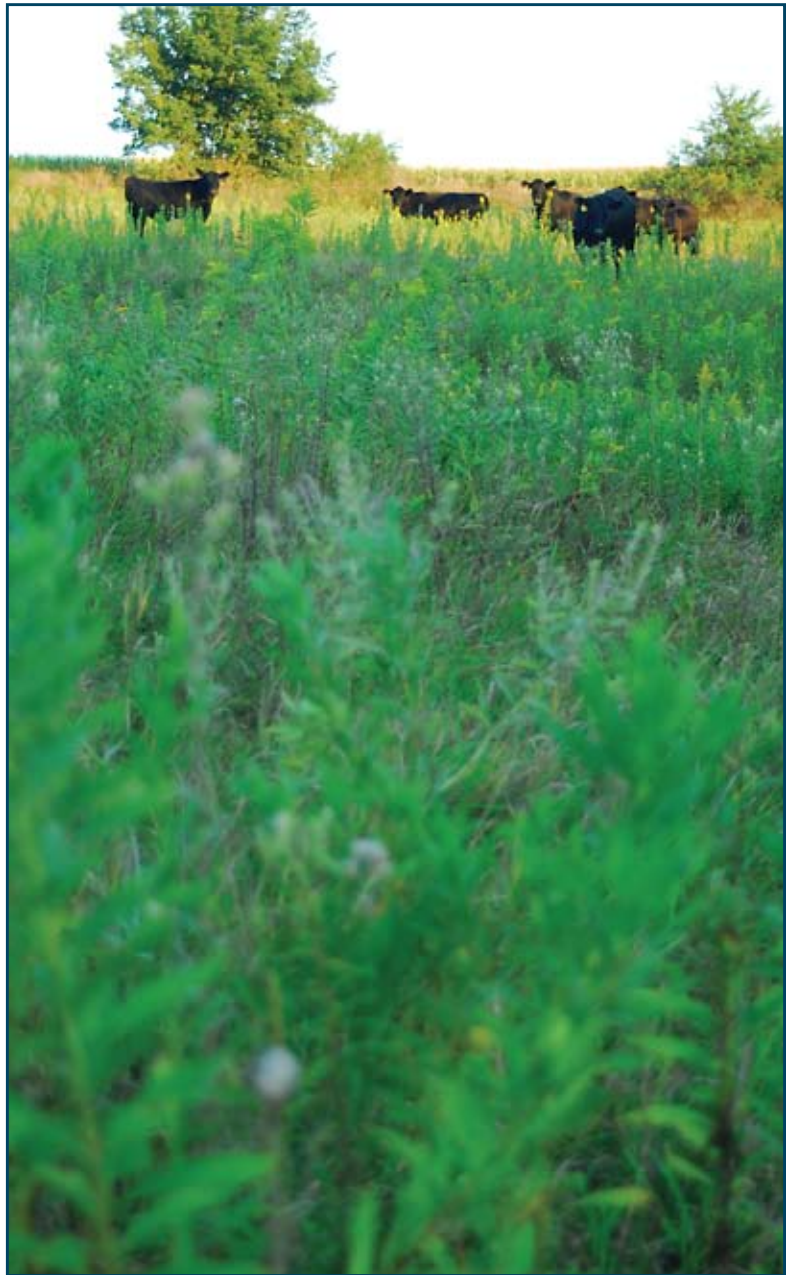
It's called grass banking. In western states grass banks have been bringing cattle producers and alternative sources of grass together for some years. In the Midwest, Agren, a private consulting firm based in Carroll, Ia., launched the first grass bank two years ago in a pilot project funded by the Loess Hills Alliance and the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS).

"We got the idea after talking with cattle producers," says Austin Sewell, a grazing specialist with Agren. "They told us the biggest thing that kept them from improving their pastures was that they had no place to put their cows. One producer said it was like trying to mop the floor of a day care center while the kids were under foot."

To find the grass for a grass bank, organizers had to look no further than public lands where countless acres of grasslands and savannas that once hosted bison and elk now lay void of the herbivores that once helped keep the lands healthy.

Deal maker. Agren worked out an agreement with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources to graze land at a reduced rate in the Pisgah unit of the Loess Hills State Forest. Then it looked for qualified cattle producers to use the grass bank. "We wanted producers with a record of good management practices and who would agree to implement conservation practices on their own land," Sewell says. "Pasture improvement is part and parcel of the grass bank idea."

This May, Marty Loftus trucked 17 cows and their calves the 10 miles from his farm to the Iowa



ATM for grass: The cattle of Marty Loftus withdraw from a grass bank on public land near Pisgah, Ia. Photo: Clay Smith

DNR grass bank near Pisgah. He's paying 50 cents per cow-calf unit per day while they graze till October. Meanwhile, he's resting one of his pastures and doing some earthwork on the dams. "Doing the earthwork and getting grass established around the ponds go so much better when the cows are gone," says Loftus, who runs about 150 beef cows altogether.

Loftus also participated in the grass bank last year. He interseeded native grass into the pasture left vacant, and plans to do some interseeding this year. "The chance to rest a pasture is big benefit of the grass bank," Loftus adds. "With root reserves built up, the grass really comes on strong the next year. Grass banking also gives us more opportunity to remove red cedar, which is a big problem in these parts."

Public land managers are giving the grass bank a thumbs up as well. "It allows us to put grazing back on the land as an ecological process," says Brent Olson, area forester for the Iowa DNR. "And we don't have the overhead of owning and managing cattle."

Acting as the middleman, Agren handled all of the contractual work and other details in the grass bank pilot project

in the Loess Hills. Elsewhere, land managers are working directly with cattle producers. In northwestern Iowa, a cattle producer is farming out 12 cow-calf pairs to graze an Iowa DNR tract of land in the Waterman Prairie (story page 8).

Another project. In central Iowa, the Polk County Conservation Board has recruited 100 head of cattle from two producers this spring to graze 400 acres of floodplain grassland in the Chichaqua Bottoms Green Belt. "Our past restoration efforts have relied heavily on burning," says Loren Lown, natural resources specialist for the board. "We're very anxious to add modest grazing to see if it will increase plant diversity and add the more open architecture needed by some wildlife species. Meanwhile, the project will provide warm-season grazing to the stockmen and give them a chance to rest their pastures."

"We think that grass banks will grow in one form or another," says Agren's Sewell. Land on both ends of the deal should benefit. "

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