

Congratulations to the Brook Ranch, recipients of the Banker's Award this year in recognition of their efforts in grasslands conservation. The Brook Ranch property, located about 11 miles west of Medicine Lodge on Highway 160, was originally purchased by John Brook, around 1921. John was a farmer and stockman in Illinois, and started out by utilizing the Kansas grass to producer calves on, then finish fattening them up on his farm, and put them on a rail car to Chicago. This went on for some time and then eventually the Ranch was leased out. John died in 1946, and the Ranch has been passed down from generation to generation, and now resides in the care of 3 cousins – Susan Brook, and sisters Anne Burket and Margaret Boyce.

When they originally took the Ranch over, their goals boiled down to being responsible custodians of the acreage, and when the timing was right, to be able to pass in along to the next generation and preserve the heritage and roots that were established over 90 years ago. Those fundamental goals have been added to over the years and the focus also includes harvesting more and more sunlight with the plants, capturing and utilizing more of what precious-little rainfall does fall on the Ranch, while still keeping things financially sustainable. Susan also mentioned that a personal goal of hers is to be able to check fence on horseback without the need of a chainsaw!

In order to work towards accomplishing these goals, and in addition to their own research, they also sought advice from outside sources. When they visited with Harold Kline, NRCS District Conservationist at the time, he drew up a plan that helped address their goals for improving both the condition of the pasture as well as developing additional water sources, and encouraged them to utilize some of the cost-share assistance available through an EQIP contract, which they did. The work that the Brook Ranch has accomplished with assistance from their EQIP contract over the last 6 years includes: brush management on over 600 acres of trees (which you can see numerous examples of in the pictures), the construction of a pond (which allowed water to be pumped from and distributed throughout the property), the completion of a couple of prescribed burns, and the implementation of a rotational grazing system. With the commitment to improving the Ranch, all of these conservation items would have been done eventually, but with a little help from the programs available, the process was allowed to be sped up to a few short years. The tree removal, which focused mainly on controlling the vast amount of eastern red cedars on the property, opened up large areas in which the sunlight (and water) could be captured by the desirable grasses, and recovered around 160 acres that were ungrazeable previously. They have also utilized aid from the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Transportation, through their State Wildlife Grant Private Landowner Program, in which they also helped with clearing a large portion of the trees. As with any good brush management plan, burning has been utilized, and will continue to be a tool moving forward to not only maintain the brush work that has been accomplished so far, but also to help improve the health and vigor of the desirable grasses and forbs. Another burn is planned just as soon as the soil moisture and weather conditions will allow. The pond was constructed in late 2007/early 2008, and is located approximately in the middle of the property. The water captured by the pond is then pumped 205 feet uphill and through nearly 3-miles of pipeline in order to provide a clean and reliable source of water to the 5 large tanks located around the Ranch. This is all powered from a solar pump, which has worked perfectly, despite the high demands on the system. With the watering system now in place, their operator, Allan Maze, was able to divide the

place up with electric fencing and begin a rotational grazing system. Previously, the lack of water precluded any sort of rest/rotation grazing system, but now Allan is able to graze the Ranch with an increased stock density, allowing for more even utilization of the grasses as well as providing more rest and recovery time. The system also maintains flexibility, which is important to Allan so that he can change the size or layout of a paddock as he sees a need for it. As with many places in Barber County, the Brook Ranch demonstrates numerous different range-sites that have their own characteristics and levels of production. Allan is diligent in monitoring these, which help him to decide when it is time to move on to the next cell, and monitor the recovery of previously-grazed paddocks. While it is still early in this method of management, there are noticeable improvements in the condition of the grass already, and it is apparent that the overall health of the Ranch is headed in a positive direction.

Moving forward, the plans are to continue to improve the condition of the Ranch by increasing the management-level of the grazing system, to install wildlife-escape ladders in each of the new watering tanks, and to work on addressing the erosion issues on the Ranch, which are linked to older problem with cattle trailing and lease roads, and possibly to completely fence-off the pond. By continuing the build-up of plant productivity and rotation of cattle, those cattle-trails should become stabilized and eventually heal-over. They are also looking to install some soil-erosion structures in order to help address issues on the lease roads, and have demonstrated their commitment to improving their Ranch by hiring a consultant to assist on these issues as well. Allan has been a very important partner in seeing these improvements through, looking at the big-picture in regards to future benefits that these practices will help his operation as well, and stated that the three owners have been very supportive. It is for their collective efforts in what has been accomplished and the improvements that are on-going that the Brook Ranch is a well-deserved recipient of the Banker's Conservation Award and example of stewardship of our the conservation of our natural resources. Congratulations!