Conservation Conversation

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Outstanding Conservationist - Alexander Ranch

The Alexander Ranch is a portion of the property Ted's grandfather, H. W. Skinner, put together in the early 1900s. By 1984, when Ted took over the management of the ranch, it had fallen into a severe state of disrepair. In fact, the ranch had become more of an Eastern red cedar forest than a cattle ranch. Old aerial photos show the migration of the cedars as they crept up out of the draws and canyons and onto the uplands. Measurements indicate that the Eastern red cedars covered about 70-75% of the surface acres at that time.

Determined to reclaim his ranch, Ted embarked on what has become a lifelong mission of environmental understanding beginning with Glenn Snell and Harold Kline. Glenn was instrumental in introducing Ted and his neighbors to Prescribed Burning as a way for Ted to rid the ranch of his favorite evergreen tree. The two began by planning and implementing a series of prescribed fires to curb the tide of the cedar encroachment. Grazing plans were developed and moderate stocking rates helped build the fuel load needed to allow the fire to cleanse the rangeland and push the trees back onto the steep side hills and into the canyons. Hundreds of hours were spent on a tree saw over the next few years reclaiming the ranch.

In 1984 the newly formed Alexander Ranch was watered by two ponds of questionable dependability and three wind pumps, so the next important item for Ted to address was water. A Great Plains cost-share program contract was soon developed that added wells, livestock tanks, a pipeline, spring developments, and additional ponds. To facilitate better grazing distribution some fencing was added to break up the larger pastures that were once more than a thousand acres in size. A novel grazing system was also started- which allowed each pasture to have a late season rest every fourth year. What was left of the marginal cropland, about 120 acres, was planted to perennial native grass.

The Alexander Ranch slowly began to take shape, resurrected through a combination of brush control, water development, grazing systems, and most importantly good management. Through his association with Glenn and Harold and their three-fold work on improving the management, Ted turned the property into a ranch. Over the years Ted has continued to pursue more ranch management training and experiment with what he has learned by applying it on the ranch, continuing to modify his planned grazing systems, develop more water sources, and improve grass production.

The ranch has evolved from a simple single pasture, seasonal grazing system, into a four pasture rotational system, then on to a twenty-eight paddock Management Intensive Rotational grazing system, and now he and Brian, his son, have a totally unconventional rotational system that includes another ranch, increased stock densities approaching mob levels, and seriously long rest periods. They make monitoring the pastures and moving the large numbers of cattle seem simple. Their plan is simple, use the available forage to a level that benefits the animals and the land then allow the plants sufficient time to rest and recover. The water system is now extensive, consisting of over 6 miles of pipelines and 15 water tanks. Two springs have been developed, the most elaborate of which is a solar powered pump that moves water through a quarter of a mile of pipeline to an 8500 gallon storage tank located on a ridge top over 100 feet above the pond, from the storage tank gravity draws the water through three miles of pipeline to supply 6 livestock tanks. Using gravity instead of electricity to water cattle, a simple yet novel approach to what, at first glance, seemed like a difficult problem.

A healthy, productive, and profitable ranch, developed over the years through his hard work, diligence, and management is a legacy anyone would be proud of, but Ted's legacy also rests in the young people and industry professionals his work has influenced, challenging all of us to address the difficult question and obvious solutions in order to improve our profession, our environment, and our world.

Bankers Award Winner - Max Nichols

Congratulations to the Max E Nichols Trust (Max Nichols), recipients of the Banker's Award this year in recognition of their efforts in grasslands conservation. Max Nichols is owner of JOMAX Construction, a pipeline construction business since 1961. First established in Great Bend, Kansas where the corporate office and warehouse are still located today. This company has held many pipeline construction projects within Barber County during the 70 and 80's. It was during these construction projects where Max became intrigued by the vast beauty of the Gyp Hill's karst topography, red soils, natural prairie vegetation, wildlife, and picturesque landscape. As a young man at the time Max thought it was only a dream that he would someday own a piece of this land he so desired.

In 2009, Max was able to make his dream come true when he purchased his first Gyp Hill Ranch of approximately 1200 acres. This property is located about 10 miles southwest of Medicine Lodge on Scenic Drive Road. This property provided all the elements that Max sought from the native prairie grasses, wildlife habitat to the natural beauty of the red soils and rugged landscape. However, this property didn't come with just those positive elements it also included a heavy infestation of eastern red cedar that were limiting the wildlife habitat and scenic views of the area that he desired. The previous landowner had worked with both state and federal wildlife cost share programs to start the initial war against red cedar invasion, however, with cost share funds limited Max put forth a substantial investment of his own money to continue clearing as many eastern red cedar tree as possible. At almost any time during the year, Max has at least one or more of his employees continuing this tree removal effort on this property.

In 2010, Max purchased his second property of approximately 1600 acres that is located about 8 miles southwest of Medicine Lodge along Gyp Hill Road. Once again, Max realized the potential this property provided but only after the heavy infestation of eastern red cedar was addressed. As many of you know, dealing with this major threat to our native grassland system and to implement an eastern red cedar removal project takes time and lots of money. Through Max's desire to get as many cedar trees removed in the shortest amount of time, he sought technical advice and cost share funding from state and federal wildlife programs. These cost share programs allowed Max to hire local tree removal contractors that in return allowed the trees to be removed at a much quicker rate than he could do on his own. Approximately two thirds of the brush management project on this property is completed. The implementation for the remaining areas will start soon.

Max has also come to realize, that just the initial removal of eastern red cedar will not be enough to maintain the native prairie grasslands as they were during the years when he was working pipeline construction in the Gyp Hills. He also understands and is working towards building a management plan to help keep these properties void of invasive trees, to properly manage the grassland resource, maintain and increase the wildlife and vegetative (grasses and forbs) diversity that was so appealing to him at a younger age. This plan will include the management and enhancement of the health and vigor of native grass and forbs through the implementation of proper grazing regimes that will include proper stocking rates and growing season grazing deferment during nesting periods and especially times of drought. Max also plans to increase wildlife habitat, vegetative diversity, and to help maintain the invasion of eastern red cedar through the implementation of prescribed fire. Other future management objectives may include the development of alternate livestock and wildlife water sources through the installation of solar water wells if water is available.

For this collective effort in what has been accomplished and the improvements that are on-going, Max Nichols is a well-deserved recipient of this year's Banker's Conservation Award and an example of stewardship of the conservation of our natural resources. Congratulations!

Bankers Award Winner - Jason Howell

Jason grew up in a farming family. I guess you would say farming was in his blood because as Jason grew up, he just always wanted to farm. His longing drove him to enroll at Kansas State University where he graduated with a degree in AG Technology Management.

After graduating college Jason came back to the family farm and the land that has been in his family for 125 years. Some of the ground he farms today is land that was homesteaded in 1887. Jason has also purchased additional ground as he has had opportunities to do so.
Most of the acres he farms are in the Preston area of Pratt County, and in the SSW corner along the Barber County line. Farming along and both sides of the Barber and Pratt County line allows Jason to work with the Medicine Lodge and Pratt conservation offices.

As he was growing up Jason helped his dad maintain the terraces and waterways built by his granddad years before. They strip farmed, planting 20 acre strips across a quarter of ground with different crops. They also contour farmed to help prevent erosion.
Blowing ground moved Jason into no-till as he saw improvement in the land and the value in always having the ground covered. He no-tills and strip tills his land with the exception of a few irrigated acres that he minimum tills. Jason tells about a field he has been no-tilling for several years that started getting small washes started in it. He figured that through all the years of conventional tillage they just farmed the eroded spots out each year, not realizing the amount of soil loss that was occurring. He now realizes how much soil he was losing without really seeing it. A few terraces were built to correct this particular problem.
Other changes to his operation with the initiation of his no-till system are the use of crop rotations which include wheat, corn, soybeans and cotton.

Jason comments that he is also looking at cover cops. He actually had seed ordered last fall to plant radishes along with his wheat. He was concerned about getting a stand due to the drought and lack of moisture, so he will try again next year. Oats are often used as a cover crop and are grazed if possible after his dry land crops have been harvested. Jason has improved the acres he farms in Barber County by rebuilding and adding waterways where needed. Although he has struggled to get a stand of brome established in the waterways, he continues re-seeding as needed to get the waterways established so the conservation work can continue on these fields. The systems will include new and rebuilding of terraces, as well as building a diversion to move larger volumes of water to a water way. Where possible Jason has used annually vegetated waterways; waterways that are shaped but not planted to a permanent grass, which allows them to be farmed along with the rest of the field. These work really well for no-tillers.
Farming today is about efficiencies. Using GPS guidance is one of the ways Jason accomplishes this. Fewer passes using no-till is also important to farm profitably in today's world. Jason is very willing to try the new technologies that are developed and sees their value.

Jason has used EQIP and CRP to help him complete many conservation projects in Pratt and Barber Counties. He sees the need for conservation and the benefits of protecting the land. His daughter, 9 year old Ruby, often rides with him in the tractor cab. It's apparent that Jason is a conservationist and is passing the love of farming and conservation along to the next generation.

We congratulate Jason Howell for his continued efforts to protect this valuable natural resource of soil through conservation practices.

What about my trees?

By Thad Rhodes, District Forester Kansas Forest Service

With the dry weather that we have been experiencing over the past two years, a lot of people are wondering how their trees are faring. Much like other vegetation, these plants are under a considerable amount of stress. Many people think that their mature trees will survive since the roots are deep enough to extend into the water table. While this may be true for certain locations, it is generally not the case, as the majority of a tree's root system is fairly shallow (within the top 24" of the soil) due to the need for oxygen exchange by the roots. Taking this into consideration, it is understandable that this portion of the soil profile is also the most prone to desiccation and competition from other vegetation.

Tree Stress

Once a tree is stressed, it will become more susceptible to insect and disease problems. A considerable number of these damaging agents are opportunistic, targeting trees that are not growing as vigorously as they should. During periods of stress, these problems can become more prevalent and increase in number and extent. A good example of this is the extensive pine mortality that is being experienced in the Rocky Mountain region from the Mountain Pine Beetle—a native insect that has reached epidemic levels because of conditions such as overcrowded older trees and periods of warmer, drier weather. Overall, healthy trees are better positioned to ward off these types of attacks and survive until conditions return to "normal."

However, young trees are not immune either. Adequate moisture is certainly an issue as well as sunscald, decline, and winter desiccation. Some of these issues can even lead to additional problems in the future, reiterating the expression that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

What can be done to help your trees?

Ideally, provide supplemental watering if possible. A slow, soaking watering will help to ensure that an adequate amount of moisture reaches the root system. Soaker hoses, buckets with holes in the bottom, or turning the hose on at a slow trickle are all possible options for landscape trees. In a larger planting such as windbreaks, supplemental watering might not be an option, so controlling competing vegetation may be the best bet. Smooth brome is notorious for competing for moisture in tree plantings and usually comes out winning. Trying to control this "green death" will free up a considerable amount of moisture for the other plants. In a forested setting, options exist for performing Timber Stand Improvement to cull out some of the competing trees to release resources for the more desirable species (usually the oaks and walnuts), as well as to encourage future regeneration. Limiting livestock access to certain areas will also help because of the soil compaction and root damage that can be caused. Through proper management of these sites, you can help to ensure that desirable species will continue to be a part of the woodland for years to come.

Regardless of your approach, it is important to remember that it has taken an extended period for the trees to get to this point and is probably not something that can be corrected overnight. By taking the time to put forth a little effort now, you will be in a better position for a quicker rebound and fewer problems in the future.

To learn more about trees, please contact your local NRCS office or conservation district office located at the USDA Service Center.

The South Central Kansas Residue Alliance 2013 Soil Improvement Spring Workshop will be held at the Pratt Area 4-H Center, 81 Lake Road, Pratt, KS at 8:30 AM on March 12, 2013. For event information contact Terry Hodgson (620) 842-5483.

Up-Coming Burn Workshops

Two prescribed burn workshops are being held in Medicine Lodge. On February 14th, a beginner's workshop will be held at the Sunflower Room of the Peoples Bank on South Main Street from 9-3 with lunch served. On March 7th, an Advanced Prescribed Burn Workshop will be held at the same location for those who may have already been to the beginner's workshop or have already some experience. More information will follow on these two workshops. Contact the conservation office (620-886-5311) in Medicine Lodge to reserve a spot for each of these workshops.

Burn Equipment Available

A 3,000 gallon tank and trailer has been donated to the Barber County Conservation District by The Nature Conservancy of Kansas. This large tank, called a "nurse tank", is hauled full of back-up water on-site for prescribed burn operations. It is used to refill smaller sprayers on ranch trucks and ATV's for various purposes in managing controlled burns. Additionally, hand-held radios, fire clothing and other equipment has been made available. Two grants to TNC have made these donations possible. The Rust Foundation provided $10,000 for purchase of the nurse tank/trailer as well as for a slide-in spray unit for pickups and one-ton flatbed trucks. The Rust Foundation funds supplied six hand-held radios earlier this past year. A grant from the McElwaine Foundation supplied another $3,000 for fire-resistant clothing, headgear and other equipment.

The Red (Gyp) Hills grasslands developed and were maintained under a regular occurrence of wildfires before efforts began during settlement in the latter part of the 1900's to prevent them. With the suppression of fires, Eastern red cedar trees started to expand into uplands. Today, many parts of Barber County and other portions of the Red Hills are choked with cedar trees gobbling up valuable rangeland and stealing precious water supplies from groundwater and streams. Generally, cedar trees have only a negative value for this rangeland. Besides taking away valuable grassland for grazing and water for streams, cedar trees also present a huge wildfire risk as exemplified in Oklahoma this past year when lives and millions of dollars of losses were experienced . This is perhaps a most important reason to perform prescribed burns so that once thick and large cedar trees are cleared, occasional prescribed fires can be applied to keep the trees from reappearing. Under controlled conditions and in suitable weather conditions, prescribed fire can be managed and is a relatively inexpensive tool for maintaining our important grasslands of the Red Hills. More equipment is being obtained to loan to ranchers wishing to try to manage and control cedar trees on their land through a cooperative arrangement between the Natural Resources Conservation Service and TNC of Kansas. More announcements will be made as more supplies become available and the process is developed for loaning this equipment to ranchers in need for prescribed burns.

Scholarship Available

The John Farney Memorial Scholarship is a $1000 scholarship sponsored by the Barber County Conservation District. The scholarship is awarded annually to a student who is entering at least his/her second year of college. Applicants must be pursuing a college degree in a conservation-related field. The applicant must also be a resident of Barber County. The deadline for applications is March 31, 2013. Applications are available at the conservation office, 800 W. 3rd Avenue, Medicine Lodge, Kansas or on our website at www.barbercountyconservationdistrict.com on the youth & education tab. You may also call (620) 886-5311 ext. 3 for more information.

Cost-Share Sign-Up

Applications for the FY 2014 Water Resources Cost-Share Program (WRCSP) and Non-Point Source Pollution Control Program (NPS) will be accepted April 1-30, 2013. Approved practices include waterway construction, grass seeding, pasture and hayland seeding, livestock water developments, ponds, terraces, pipe outlets, erosion control structures, and windbreaks. All applications will be ranked according to priority of the resource concern. Funding will become available July 1. Remember, all projects must be approved for funding prior to beginning. Applications for cost-share assistance through the Non-Point Source Pollution Control Program (NPS) will also be accepted during the April sign-up period. Approved practices for this program include repair of failed septic systems, abandoned water well plugging, and livestock waste management. As in all cost-share programs, a project must receive approval before it can be started.

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