

Grassbanks offer offsite grazing during pasture renovation

Grassbanks Case Study Key Points

Grassbanks:

- offer offsite grazing for producers who are renovating their own pastures
- provide public land managers access to cattle for controlled grazing that improves their grasslands for wildlife
- pleased both the public land manager and the cattleman in a pilot project on the Loess Hills State Forest
- use reduced livestock numbers, usually only a third of the normal stocking rate for grazing



Grassbanks “double-win” in grassland improvement

One cattleman put it this way: Trying to renovate a pasture while cattle are grazing it is like trying to mop the floor of a



Stan Buman

daycare center with the kids running around in it.

“Cattlemen have to have some place to put their cattle while they interseed, rest, burn, develop



Brent Olson

water supplies, and do other things to renovate their pastures,” says Stan Buman.

“Since there’s not that much pasture around, and it would essentially double the cost

to rent pasture while your own pasture is idled during renovation, it gets put off,” Buman says. “At the same time,

we know there are native grasslands as well as cool season grass plantings in Iowa that haven’t been disturbed for years that would benefit from controlled grazing.”

That’s where grassbanks come into the picture. They match a cattleman who wants to renovate his pasture with a public or private landowner who

“Grassbanks match cattlemen who need pasture while they renovate their pastures with public or private land managers who want more diversity in their grasslands”

has ungrazed grassland that’s become thick with thatch and sod-bound. Landowners who have established prairie grasses may be interested in occasional grazing because it removes thatch, opens the land up for more forbs to grow, and improves habitat for wildlife.

“Getting the cattleman who wants to improve his pasture together with an owner of native grassland that needs disturbance is a win-win situation,” Buman says. “It will help keep grazing profitable and improve the grassland for both parties.”

Buman, vice-president and partner of Agren, Inc. in Carroll, has worked for several years with the Loess Hills Alliance to help preserve native grasslands.

He says a grassbank agreement can work a lot of ways. It may or may not require a cattleman to make improvements to his pasture while he grazes

other land, it may or may not involve a rental charge from the native grassland owner, and it may be from one to several years. “It really depends on the goals of both parties,” Buman says.

Pilot grassbank on state land

Buman helped develop the multi-year Loess Hills Grassbank on state-owned land in the Loess Hills State Forest in Harrison County.

The grassbank was part of a 3-year pilot study funded by a Conservation Innovation Grant from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

“We were trying to bring together the needs of the producer who wants to improve his grazing land and wants a place to relocate his cattle, with the needs of public land managers who can use managed grazing to control weeds and bring about more diversity in plant species,” says Larry Beeler, NRCS assistant state conservationist.

Brent Olson, an area forester for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources and manager of the Loess Hills State Forest, agreed to allow grazing on two areas of open land in the forest.

“There’s no good reason to have cattle in woodlands, for the cattle or the trees,” Olson says. “But we have open grassland areas in the state forest that might benefit from limited grazing once in a while.”



MORE PRAIRIE GRASSES AND FORBS: The combination of burning and then grazing with low stocking rates resulted in less bromegrass and more prairie plants.



VEGETATIVE COVER LEFT: Even in a dry year, there was a lot of vegetation left, in varying heights, after a season of grazing was completed with reduced stocking rates.

One of the two pastures grazed was 60 acres in the Little Sioux unit that had been a heavily grazed bromegrass years ago, before it became part of the state forest. It had been idle for the past 15 years and was infested with Canadian and musk thistles.

“We sprayed, mowed, and burned to control the thistles. I didn’t want to see those thistles back again, so was willing to give controlled grazing a try,” Olson says.

“All we did was offer the land for grazing at no cost. I wanted to see if it would work in a situation where I was hands-off, to test it and see whether it might work for other state land managers who don’t have a lot of time to get involved but whose land might benefit from grazing,” Olson says.

“It worked out on both areas. I’m happy we tried it,” Olson says. “The combination of burning and grazing set the bromegrass back. Now we see more clumps of little and big bluestem, sideoats grama, and other prairie grasses and forbs. We had a positive experience; I’d provide land again.”



LOSING BIRDS: A diversity of grasses and grass heights is helpful to meadowlarks and other birds that depend on grasslands. Grassland birds have the highest rates of decline in the country.

Olson worked with two cattlemen, who trucked their cattle in and left them in the pasture from spring until hunting season in the fall.

Bird studies showed the variation



ELECTRIC FENCE WORKED: A four-strand, high tensile electric fence was built around the perimeter of the two pastures.

in grass heights and species in grazed pastures produced as many or more total birds and grassland bird species as a nearby grassland that was not grazed. “I began to notice that the cattle picked their favorite ice cream food the first time through, then would come back a month later and eat the plants that were good at that time. You could see the different grazing patterns helped create diversity,” Olson says.

Fences are an issue

Contractors built 4-strand, high tensile fences around the pastures. Olson says fences are an issue, both because of the expense and because he tries to take fences out rather than build them.

Public hunting is allowed on all the forest land, Olson says, and he was concerned that hunters would object to cattle and fences. “But that wasn’t the case. They liked the idea of getting more diversity in the grasses, and were supportive of the project,” he says. The pilot project financed the fences as well as installation of water supplies.

“I think the cattlemen were happy, too, and surprised that they could leave so much grass in the pasture and get good weight gains on their cattle,” Olson says.

Cattle did well on pasture

While the goal of a grassbank isn’t to offer heavy grazing to cattlemen, it is important to have enough feed to keep cattle and cattlemen satisfied. Marty Loftus of Logan trucked 17 cow-calf pairs and 13 heifers more than 10 miles to two different Loess Hills State Forest pastures in 2008.

“My cows had plenty to eat,” he says. “They keep the stocking rate pretty low.”

Loftus says using the grassbank program allowed him to rebuild some dams, take out cedar trees, and seed some native grass. “It let me give my pasture a break, too,” he says.

“It was a plus for my cows, and made a mix of short grass and long



HELP TO THE OAK SAVANNA: One grazing goal in the 90-acre pasture at the Pisgah Unit was to help restore the oak savanna.

grass in the pasture, and insects for the birds,” he says.

“I’d do it again. I just hope they keep it up,” Loftus says.

Stocking rate rule of thumb

Buman cautions prairie owners to base their grazing agreement on a set number of cattle for a set number of days, rather than renting pastures

by the acre without specifying cattle numbers.

“You need to be able to control how much grass is left, by controlling the stocking rate,” he says. He says a rule of thumb is to reduce stocking rates to a third of the normal recommended rate for moderate grazing.

“You can start with that, monitor the grass, and go from there,” Buman says. “The thing to remember is we’re grazing to open up a stand of grass, to encourage more diversity in plants and structure. We want to leave a lot of grass in the pasture after grazing, not graze it into the ground.”

Fencing and water supply costs

A primary consideration in any agreement is the cost of fencing and the availability of water. Since cattlemen aren’t likely to pay rent and build fence, an option for the owner might be to offer grazing for free if the cattleman puts up the fence.

Buman recommends a written agreement up front that addresses fencing, water supplies, cattle numbers, length of grazing season, acres to be grazed, number of years of grazing, monitoring, and other points. “We developed a business plan for the pilot study that we’ll share with anyone,” he says.

Buman encourages cattlemen considering grassbank grazing to ask their local DNR wildlife biologist if he or she has considered controlled grazing on land they manage. Grassland owners who want to improve the diversity and structure of their older grass stands can also get information on that from their local NRCS office.

The pilot study included educational efforts including this pasture walk at the Loess Hills State Forest that brought together public land managers and cattlemen to discuss the merits of grassbanks.



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