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NRCS This Week

Your Report for Conservation on Private Lands

Kansas Patch Burning



Kansas rancher Jane Koger is trying an ambitious new strategy to better manage her cattle on 4,000 acres of tallgrass prairie. Koger, who raises 85 head annually in a cow/calf herd, researched ways

to ranch more carefully in her rare prairie ecosystem. The resulting "patch burning" system she developed with conservation organizations, along with technical assistance from her NRCS field office and a SARE producer grant, seems a promising alternative for the health of the prairie and its diverse native species.

Like her ranching neighbors, Koger used to burn her entire acreage of prairie yearly to improve its nutritional value for cattle. Yet, full-scale burning destroyed habitat for species like the endangered prairie chicken, as well as native plants.

Koger learned about a Nature Conservancy patch burning project in Oklahoma that featured burning one-third of the property each year, with a repeat cycle over the following three years. After each burn, cattle usually flock to the area within a few days. Data from Kansas

- Centers and Institutes

State University shows that yearling cattle will gain as well under patch burning as with annual burns.



“Tall grass is really important for bird nesting,” said Koger, who also rents land to two other ranchers who raised 550 head of yearlings and 60 head of cows in the experimentally

burned pastures. Patch burning should achieve both of her goals: raising cattle and preserving the ecosystem. “We know we can produce Big Macs, but we’re losing some of our bird species,” she said. “This is a better way to protect them.”

Koger has a long history of working with NRCS dating back to the early 1980s, when she worked with the former SCS to seed areas of the ranch back to native grass. In 2002, she began working with district conservationist Gay Spencer on a range management plan, including stocking rates.

Koger burned two-thirds of her pasture in 2004 after developing a burn plan, partly with help from Spencer, who works at NRCS’ Cottonwood Falls Field Office. Using the ArcView mapping system, the plan included ways to segment Koger’s acreage using “natural” borders like roads and low-lying areas where water tends to accumulate.

“Jane had been an innovator in the county, and she’s always willing to try new ideas,” said Spencer, who provided help with range planning and stocking rates and helped develop burn plans for each pasture.

“Her goal has always been to leave the land in better condition than

when she took over.”

Koger received a 2004 SARE producer grant to further her prairie restoration project – coordinating management of her project team, collecting data and reseeding about 60 acres of previously cultivated land. Her team includes representatives from The Nature Conservancy and U.S. Fish & Wildlife.

The fires mimic historic patterns in nature, and the animals seem to know what to do. The fires themselves control the movement of the livestock, which migrate to the burned area a few days after the fire is out. The new growth is more palatable than grasses that typically grow 3 feet high, said Koger, who saw her herd spend 80 percent of their time in a just- burned patch. Moreover, patch burning leaves two years of old growth grass, creating more fuel for a hotter burn in the next cycle to destroy trees and other invasive, woody species..



“It’s what the Native Americans did to attract the buffalo,” she said. “We’re just following the historical burning to attract the animals.”

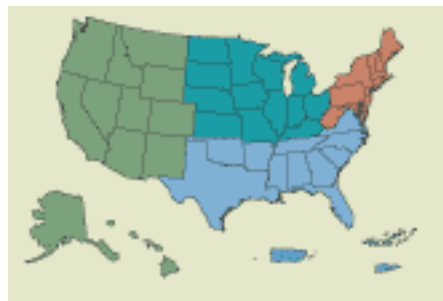
About SARE

Since 1988, the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program has helped advance farming systems that are profitable, environmentally sound and good for communities through a nationwide grants program. The program, administered by the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, USDA, funds projects and conducts outreach designed to improve

agricultural systems and natural resources.

NRCS field office professionals frequently collaborate on SARE-funded projects and are valuable partners to the SARE program. NRCS staff serve on SARE's national Operations Committee, on regional Administrative Councils, on state committees and are actively engaged as technical advisers and collaborators on SARE-funded research grants around the U.S.

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