



# Grazier

► by Kindra Gordon

## Conservation partners

*What started with the Soil Erosion Service in 1933 has expanded to include many resources available today to assist private landowners with crop and grazing land improvements.*

### Building relationships

For more than 70 years, American landowners have had a partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in bringing conservation improvements to the land. Today, many of the minimum-till cropping methods, wildlife habitat enhancements, crossfencing, water developments and rotational grazing systems across the country are testaments to the successful partnership of this U.S.

Department of Agriculture (USDA) agency and the voluntary conservation expertise it offers to private landowners.

“Partnerships with USDA agencies like NRCS offer excellent opportunities for producers to meet multiple goals for natural

resource benefits,” says Kim Stine of the NRCS in Lincoln, Neb. Stine is the Northern Plains regional coordinator and assists producers in a multi-state area to implement conservation-minded improvements on private lands.

Additionally, landowners are forming valuable partnerships with conservation coalitions and even environmental groups to work toward one common goal — land stewardship.

“We’re seeing a multitude of groups like The Nature Conservancy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife [Service], Ducks Unlimited and Pheasants Forever who want to work with landowners to enhance natural resources,” Stine says.

Here’s a glimpse at some of the innovative conservation partnerships available in the 21st century.

### Local impact

Today, every county in the United States is served by an NRCS staff and local conservation district with specialists in agronomy, soil science, biology, engineering, range and pasture, or forestry to assist in implementing land solutions.

That goal of providing voluntary conservation assistance is what inspired the formation of this USDA agency more than 70 years ago. It was the vision of soil scientist Hugh Hammond Bennett, who saw the devastation of soil erosion across the country in the late 1920s and early 1930s. He was committed to helping landowners tailor conservation practices to bring productivity back to their fields and pastures.

Under Bennett’s leadership, the agency got its start in 1933 as the Soil Erosion Service, predecessor to the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) and now NRCS. It began by working

with farmers in southwestern Wisconsin to transform eroding fields into a conservation showplace of wise land

use that benefited soil, air, water and plants, as well as animal and human life across the whole watershed.

From those beginnings, NRCS continues to offer technical assistance and numerous Farm Bill-funded programs for conservation-oriented land improvements. Examples include the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Watershed Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP) and the popular Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), which is similar to the former Great Plains program available in the 1980s.

Wall, S.D., rancher Dick Kjerstad is a firm believer in the results of conservation practices landowners have implemented throughout the years with assistance from NRCS. “Without conservation methods in place in our area, today would be a Dust Bowl worse than the 1930s,” he says, “because in 2003 some places recorded less rain than in the 1930s.”

On his diversified farm and ranch operation, Kjerstad and his family have relied on conservation to make a living from the often drought-stricken land. With NRCS programs, they’ve implemented crossfencing, water developments and pasture renovations

to develop an efficient rotational grazing system. They use no-till farming methods on their farmland to leave the soil undisturbed from harvest to planting and to help store precious moisture.

### New partners

In addition to NRCS’s long-standing commitment to aiding landowners with conservation options, many new — and sometimes surprising — partners are emerging to work with private landowners in protecting America’s farm and ranch lands.

The **Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative** (GLCI) was formed in 1991 and is a national effort that strives to provide voluntary, technical grazing assistance to private landowners. Member organizations include the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF), the American Forage and Grassland Council (AFGC), the American Sheep Industry, the dairy industry, the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA), the National Farmers Union (NFU), the Society for Range Management (SRM), and the Soil and Water Conservation Society (SWCS).

In the 13 years since this cooperative effort formed, these entities have worked to ensure that the NRCS is adequately staffed with grazing specialists. The group has lobbied for conservation and grazing programs to be funded in Farm Bill legislation. And, through state and local efforts, the group has hosted hundreds of grazing workshops and tours to educate and inform landowners and the public about the benefits of good grazing practices.

“We’ve had some successes in making sure NRCS has the staff to offer technical grazing assistance to the farmers and ranchers they work with,” says Bob Drake, an Oklahoma cattle rancher and chairman of the national GLCI steering committee for the past six years. He says he hopes that GLCI efforts continue in that vein and also create additional opportunities in the areas of grazing education and research.

**The Nature Conservancy** has stepped forward as a partner to private landowners as well. This organization aims to preserve plants and animals and the open spaces in which they live, and they realize that to do so, they must also work with landowners.

“The Nature Conservancy understands that humans and habitats go hand in hand. Large blocks of land are needed to protect natural communities, and we realize that can’t be done without humans happily involved and making a sustainable living from the land,” says Laura Bell, who is director of the Wyoming Nature Conservancy Absarokas program.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 142

Bell explains that The Nature Conservancy primarily works with private landowners to conserve important habitat, with one of the most common methods used being the conservation easement, either donated or purchased. Most ranches that have conservation easements in place continue to operate as sustainable ranch entities, she adds.

In addition, the Conservancy is partnering with the ranching community by developing the “grassbank” model, which involves an

exchange of forage for a conservation value. As an example, Bell says, the Heart Mountain Ranch Grassbank near Cody, Wyo., makes 2,000-3,000 animal unit months (AUMs) of forage available to local ranchers who are doing restoration work on their public or private rangelands. Producers have the opportunity to graze their livestock on the grassbank while restoration projects, such as prescribed burning, riparian restoration, rest and specific species habitat restoration, take place on the land they would have traditionally grazed.

“It sets up a win-win situation for the landowner and the land resource,” Bell says,

because of the rest or improvement given to the restored land. She reports that more grassbank projects are in place around the country, including the Malpai Borderland Group in New Mexico and the Matador Ranch managed by The Nature Conservancy in Montana.

Other unique partnerships are also emerging with private landowners and numerous public entities. These scenarios can take on several forms with the land as the benefactor. Wall, S.D., rancher Gene Williams is working to get the important message of conservation to the public.

Williams’ family ranch is located adjacent

to South Dakota's Badlands National Park, and he has worked tirelessly to inform and educate tourists and park staff about the benefits provided by ranching and conservation practices. Currently, a herd of buffalo graze in a wilderness area of the Badlands, but cattle grazing is not allowed in the park.

"Our goal is to show that cows aren't something that's evil, but something to be managed," Williams says. He recently made a ranch-access arrangement with the park to help provide educational opportunities for park visitors to learn about his cattle ranch. The agreement includes plans for a six-mile-

long bicycle trail that features signposts with color photos and text describing the land and its inhabitants, as well as walk-in hunting areas.

"The hope was that people who aren't familiar with the positives that result from active management tied to agriculture will understand and see some of the benefits provided to wildlife, water quality and landscape scenery from ranching," Williams says. "We want the public to be aware of the benefits of conservation by landowners, so they support the use of tax dollars for conservation."

These are just a few examples of the

innovative ideas and partnerships occurring in conservation and land stewardship. It's likely that more national, state, private and public entities will begin to cooperate with producers on projects such as these, as well as land trusts and conservation easements designed to preserve the open space and the rural communities they serve for future generations.



**E-MAIL:** [kindras@gordonresources.com](mailto:kindras@gordonresources.com)