



2017

YEAR IN REVIEW



LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD® PROGRAM

The farmers, ranchers and foresters who own and manage the majority of land in the U.S. hold the keys to meaningful environmental improvement in this nation. Sand County Foundation inspires and enables private landowners to exercise their individual responsibility to ethically manage the natural resources in their care.

In his famous book, *A Sand County Almanac*, renowned conservationist, landowner and scientist Aldo Leopold wrote, “the landscape of any farm is the owner’s portrait of himself.” Sand County Foundation’s Leopold Conservation Award® Program honors landowners who live by the tenets of Leopold’s land ethic. That is, a land ethic changes the role of people from conquerors of the land-community to members and citizens of it.

The award program celebrates commitment to improved land health as it recognizes farmers, ranchers and other landowners who are delivering conservation on their own land.

Working with partners and sponsors, Sand County Foundation presents the \$10,000 award and a crystal depicting Aldo Leopold, in settings that showcase the landowner’s conservation successes.

The award makes an impact by publicly recognizing extraordinary achievement in voluntary conservation, inspiring thousands of other landowners representing millions of acres, and influencing the general public’s understanding of the importance of private working lands in conservation.

Their compelling stories become the basis for an active public information program that recognizes the environmental accomplishments of working farms, ranches and forests. These landowners truly encompass the American dream of creating a successful business while practicing conservation for the benefit of this and future generations.

Sand County Foundation and its many partners and sponsors actively seek others to become part of this important story. An award program of this stature could not exist without quality landowner nominees and contributions both large and small.

To learn more, visit www.leopoldconservationaward.org

2017 marked a milestone year for Sand County Foundation and our Leopold Conservation Award Program. Sand County Foundation celebrated 50 years of private land conservation success, and we proudly presented the 100th Leopold Conservation Award to the Thomson family at the California Farm Bureau annual meeting.



The Thomsons joined a remarkable group of leading land stewards, their families, and a long list of supporters who represent a formidable force for conservation across the US.

Sand County Foundation accepts as its core responsibility to ensure that their story is told and that their voices are heard on the many natural resource issues facing our nation.

There are hundreds of other landowners whose stories need to be heard. This fact is reinforced by our continued program growth into more states, and by the large, strong group of applications we received this year.

As you read the stories of the 2017 award recipients, you will appreciate the immense pride they gain from their work and the deep-seated love they have for the land. For them, it's not always about an immediate financial return. It's about doing the right thing, challenging conventional wisdom, and striving to figure out ways to work with their land to make it healthier and more profitable in the long run.

Please join this movement in 2018 by nominating a deserving family in your state, sharing these stories with those unfamiliar with agriculture, and by offering financial support for this important program.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kevin J. McAliese".

*President and CEO
Sand County Foundation*



CALIFORNIA



THOMSON INTERNATIONAL, INC.



Photo: Paolo Vescia

“MR. THOMSON WAS THE KIND OF FARMER AND LANDOWNER WHO INSPIRED OTHER FARMERS AND CONSERVATIONISTS,” SAID ROBERT HANSEN, PRESIDENT OF TULARE BASIN WILDLIFE PARTNERS. “HE WAS THE KIND OF PERSON WITH UNASSAILABLE CREDENTIALS WHEN IT CAME TO THE ABILITY TO PAY FORWARD LEOPOLD’S LAND ETHIC PHILOSOPHY IN AN UNTHREATENING WAY TO OTHER LANDOWNERS DURING THESE CHALLENGING TIMES OF DROUGHT AND CLIMATE CHANGE.”

Jeff Thomson’s great-grandfather, C.B. Crawford, began near his 160-acre homestead in 1888. After the small farm’s water source ran dry, he became a market duck hunter on Jerry Slough, 40 miles west of Bakersfield. With money saved from duck sales, C.B. bought several farming parcels that are still farmed by the Thomson family today.

Now **Thomson International, Inc.** is a fifth-generation farm near Bakersfield that produces a variety of annual vegetable crops, including watermelons, onions, potatoes and carrots. With the lifelong mission “to enhance the soil and the land we farm”, the late Jeff Thomson pioneered and deployed a suite of notable conservation approaches to better steward the soil, water and wildlife both on and off his land. His early use of soil sensors to monitor subsurface drip irrigation has reduced water use on a number of his crops by up to 60%.

For more than a quarter century, Thomson led collaborative efforts by Central Valley Joint Venture, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Tulare Basin Wetlands Association and Tulare Basin Wildlife Partners and with neighbors and sportsmen to protect, enhance and maintain important wetlands that benefit a variety of waterfowl, including imperiled bird species in the Tulare Basin. He

established a protected wetland on his own property, a model that was followed by neighbors.

Throughout Thomson’s 850 acres of wetland, he went to great lengths to improve plant diversity. The wetland contains perennials such as Baltic rush and round stem tulles, and moist soil annuals such as swamp timothy and alkali bull rush. Thomson kept water depths at various levels to help provide diverse habitat for waterfowl, including a large population of shorebirds that resides on the property for nearly 150 days per year.

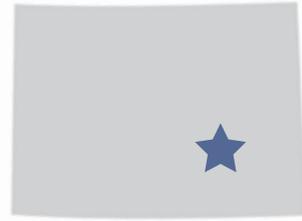
Thomson made it his life-long mission to improve soil health. And not merely with water management improvements. He implemented a specific crop rotation of watermelon, followed by peppers, onions, fall potatoes and carrots. The rotation remains an effective way to control weeds, disease and insect build-up. Prior to planting potatoes, Thomson applied gypsum and ornamental sulfur to the land to improve water penetration and keep the soil at an optimal pH.

Jeff Thomson’s legacy lives on. He passed down his dedication to conservation to his children, who now manage the business. And his leadership influenced many others along the way. ★

Presented in Partnership with



COLORADO



RANCHO LARGO CATTLE CO.



Photos: Tri-State Generation and Transmission Inc.

“IT’S NOT AN UNDERSTATEMENT TO CALL GRADY A LEADER IN HIS FIELD. AS A RANCHER, GRADY HAS A KEEN EYE FOR CHANGES ON THE LANDSCAPE AND IS ALWAYS INNOVATING HIS OPERATION NOT ONLY FOR BEEF PRODUCTION, BUT FOR BALANCE AND HARMONY IN THE ECOLOGICAL PROCESSES THAT OCCUR AND MAKE RANCHO LARGO A TEXTBOOK EXAMPLE OF THE SHORTGRASS ECOSYSTEM,” SAID SETH GALLAGHER, PROGRAM MANAGER, NATIONAL FISH AND WILDLIFE FOUNDATION.

Located southwest of Fowler, Colorado, **Rancho Largo Cattle Company** is a 14,000-acre cow/calf and stocker cattle ranch managed by **Grady Grissom**, and co-owned with his former college roommate Robert Lovelace. Depending on weather and grass availability, Grady adjusts his numbers of cows, calves and stocker cattle through buying and selling, making him less dependent on any one section of the industry.

When Grady started taking steps to improve the ecological health of the ranch, he gathered as much information as possible through NRCS range specialists, extension range schools, trade magazines and publications about holistic management. Using adaptive grazing management, Grady slowly began improving plant diversity on the ranch. A cascade effect took place: residual grass improved water retention, production increased and the land became more drought resilient. Eventually the improved plant diversity led to increased insect activity and soil organic matter.

Most ranchers who use adaptive grazing techniques annually plan their grazing strategies, but Grady discovered that his flexible stocking rates allow him to plan three times per year. He also figures three droughts per year into his plan, keeping him ahead

of any drought-driven drop in animal performance markets or ecological health.

Another unique aspect of the ranch is the breed of cows. Mother cows often include Arizona Reservation Cattle, Longhorns and Corrientes, each of which behaves more similar to wild animals compared to typical domestic breeds. In Grady’s experience, these breeds have less calving problems, travel better in rough country and consume a wider variety of plant species than domestic cattle. Using these breeds helped revitalize the ecology in many areas of the ranch where domestic cattle would not go.

Grady strongly believes communication is the key to helping bridge the gap of understanding between urban and rural communities. The ranch hosts student tours, birding tours, art workshops and other visitors to convey a simple message: ranchers choose to live on a remote piece of land because they love the land and the lifestyle, and they depend on healthy land to make a living. On the other side of the coin, Grady also promotes cooperative projects and believes conservation will benefit ranchers in the long-term. ★

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KANSAS



LAZY VJ FARMS



“ROD LIVES LEOPOLD’S BELIEF THAT CONSERVATION IS A STATE OF HARMONY BETWEEN MEN AND LAND,” SAID FRIEND AND RANCHER DARYL DONOHUE. “FROM BURN SCHOOLS FOR RANCHERS TO WATER FESTIVALS FOR SCHOOL KIDS, AND FROM WILDFLOWER TOURS ATTRACTING URBAN DWELLERS TO EDUCATING STATE AND LOCAL OFFICIALS, HE HAS CREATED AND SUSTAINED PROGRAMS THAT BRING A LOVE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT TO PEOPLE WHO MIGHT OTHERWISE BE OBLIVIOUS TO ITS IMPORTANCE.”

Growing up, **Rod Vorhees’** father taught ecology at a local school. Although he didn’t realize it at the time, Rod was essentially immersed in an ecology class at home on the farm while he worked with his father, preparing him for a career dedicated to the family farm and conservation. Today Rod manages **Lazy VJ Farms**, his family’s fourth generation cow/calf ranch in Fredonia.

When Rod began taking on a leadership role at the farm and purchasing neighboring land in the 80s, he was eager to focus on improving land health. He converted all land with tillage history to permanent vegetative cover using cover crops, and established cool season plant communities. These improvements have complemented the native prairie ecosystem and extended the time of available quality forage.

Pastures on the ranch are managed using rotational grazing. Cattle are moved from one paddock to another to allow for a period of rest and regrowth. The cattle are also rotated to different types of pastures throughout the year to help provide quality nutrition. Rod strives for *optimum* production rather than *maximum* production, and does his best to provide

care for the often-forgotten components of land management such as nongame wildlife, pollinators and migrating species.

The abundant plant diversity on the ranch provides excellent wildlife habitat. The property has 2,000 continuous acres, including cool and warm season varieties of native and introduced grasses, forbs, legumes, native timberland and riparian areas. The array of habitats that are created and cared for provide wildlife ample food, water and cover.

Rod believes no generation can precisely predict what changes future generations will encounter. He recognizes that it will be important for the next generation to be educated about the nuances of conservation and land management in order for the business to continue into the future. Working with his son Tom and his grandson has given Rod the opportunity to instill the land ethic his dad gave to him. This gives him peace of mind that good management decisions will be made into the future. ★

Presented in Partnership with



KENTUCKY



TALLOW CREEK FARM



“WHILE EVERY LANDOWNER AND ACRE OF IMPROVED HABITAT IS IMPORTANT, SOME LANDOWNERS AND IMPROVEMENTS LEAVE AN UNDENIABLE IMPRESSION. HARRY AND KAREN PELLE ARE EXCEPTIONAL LANDOWNERS WHO TRULY STAND OUT AS WILDLIFE MANAGERS WITH A STEWARDSHIP ETHIC. THEY HAVE BEEN ABLE TO PIECE TOGETHER A REMARKABLE FARM THAT IS BEING MANAGED FOR TIMBER PRODUCTION AND RECREATION COMPATIBLE WITH AN EQUAL DESIRE OF FISH AND WILDLIFE HABITAT,” SAID STEVE BEAM, WILDLIFE DIVISION DIRECTOR, KENTUCKY DEPARTMENT OF FISH & WILDLIFE RESOURCES.

Working long and hard at their jobs running a custom injection molding firm, **Ray Pelle** and his son **Harry** decided to pursue their dream of owning land to hunt and reconnect with nature. Ray bought the first 400-acre tract of land in 1982 in the knobby Tallow Creek area of northern Taylor County. After Ray’s passing in 2003, Harry and his wife **Karen** continued to follow the dream and have since added another 1,100 acres of forest onto **Tallow Creek Farm**.

While enjoying their land, Harry and Karen realized it needed some work, particularly if they were going to “recreate” a healthier forest. The Pelles contacted the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources for technical guidance. This blossomed into new ideas for habitat improvements, developing Forest Stewardship Plans with the Kentucky Division of Forestry, and taking advantage of USDA programs for forest management. Today, the Pelles are no longer solely focused on recreation, but now they have creatively embraced long term sustainable forest management to keep their investment productive for generations to come.

Unenlightened but common logging practices had left the Pelles with mostly small-to-medium saw timber with a large percentage of low quality, less desirable species on their woodland acres. The family has been working to improve timber quality through cull tree

removal and mid-story removal for regeneration. Dead and low-quality trees have been harvested for firewood. The growing crop of trees is maturing. When the stand conditions warrant, timber harvests will be implemented on a schedule to maximize long term sustainable production. In other words, a more ecologically resilient forest will provide more certain economic outcomes.

Timber stand improvements (TSI) have not only improved the quality of forest crops, but they have also significantly improved wildlife habitat. TSI creates openings in the forest canopy that stimulate increased growth of understory vegetation, providing browse, cover and soft mast for wildlife. The Pelles leave snags that are important for cavity nesting wildlife and insects that are a valuable food source for birds.

Sustainable income to continue forest improvements is very important to the Pelles. In 2010 Harry and Karen entered their property into a long-term carbon sequestration agreement with Mountain Association for Community and Economic Development. Income generated from carbon credits will be used to sustain the property and forest management activities for future generations. ★

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MISSOURI



UPTOWN FARMS



“MANAGEMENT PRACTICES LIKE NO-TILL, COVER CROPS, CROP ROTATION AND RESPONSIBLE GRAZING DEMONSTRATE THE LAMBERT’S COMMITMENT TO CONSERVATION STEWARDSHIP AND PRESERVATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES,” SAID GARY MARSHALL, CEO, MISSOURI CORN MERCHANDISING COUNCIL.

When he was a kid, **Matt Lambert** watched his dad unhitch his plow for the last time to begin the transition to a no-till system on the family farm. Growing up and seeing his dad challenge conventional agricultural wisdom set the stage for how Matt would eventually run his own farm.

Along with his wife **Kate**, Matt set out to start his career in farming when he was 22. He quickly realized that the “best farms” were not within reach for someone that young. The farms available to rent were often located in challenging spots with poor soil quality, highly erodible land, and areas that had been poorly managed or neglected in the past. Matt and Kate took these “leftovers” as a challenge to overcome by innovation and adaptation.

After several years of dedication and grit, Matt and Kate now own and manage **Uptown Farms**, a 2,000-acre crop enterprise with a commercial-beef herd and a small flock of sheep. In their area of Missouri, few farms have made a complete transition to no-till like the Lamberts. By committing to complete no-till, the Lamberts have reduced fuel costs by eliminating the need to drive across their fields to till. Their soil has dramatically improved through less compaction and disruption, minimizing erosion and runoff and increasing soil organic matter.

Several years ago, the Lamberts wanted to increase their grazing acres without having to spend more money for access to new acreage. They decided to plant cover crops to give new purpose to fields that were standing empty half of the year. They have experimented with growing cover crops such as radishes, turnips, crimson clover, wheat and rye.

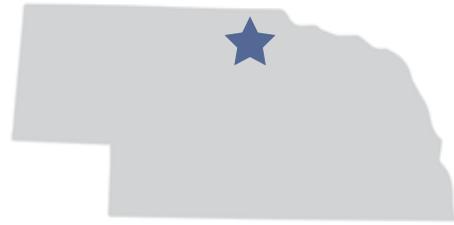
One of the business obstacles the Lamberts have had to manage is balancing their conservation goals with the expectations of their landlords. After the Lamberts had success with cover crops on their owned land, they wanted to expand cover crops to their rented land. To convince their landlords of the benefits of cover crops, Matt and Kate financed the cost of cover crops for the first few years. Once the landlords saw the positive results, they jumped on board.

The Lamberts are avid contributors to their local and state-wide agriculture community. Matt serves as a member of the Missouri Corn Merchandising Council board. Kate’s employer, Farm Credit, sends her across the state to speak with young, beginning producers about advocating for better ag policy and informing consumers. They are also active in their local Farm Bureau and Chamber of Commerce. ★

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NEBRASKA



K & W FARMS



“THE KAUPS HAVE GONE OUT OF THEIR WAY TO HELP OTHERS LOOK AT DIFFERENT WAYS OF IMPROVING THEIR OWN FARMING OPERATIONS,” SAID JON LUDWIG, WATER QUALITY SPECIALIST WITH THE NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE. “THIS IS TRULY A FAMILY FARM DEDICATED TO THE LAND AND PRESERVING IT FOR THE FUTURE.”

Kurt and Wayne Kaup own and manage **K & W Farms** in Stuart, Nebraska, where they raise hogs and crops on the eastern edge of the Sandhills. With a commitment to improving natural resources, the Kaups are leaders in implementing no-till farming strategies combined with irrigation water management and the use of cover crops to improve the health of the soil, reduce erosion and recycle nutrients. Cover crops, in conjunction with no-till farming, promote more soil organic matter and increase water-holding capacity of the soil.

Understanding how their farming practices impact the environment around them, the Kaups have planted shelterbelts and food plots for wildlife. They have left standing grain for winter food to benefit wildlife ranging from grassland dependent birds to pollinators such as native bees and monarch butterflies. The family has also removed deciduous trees to take away “raptor perches” to help prevent predation on pheasants, prairie chickens, grouse and songbirds. Elsewhere, other trees have been planted for wildlife protection. In recent years, populations of pheasant, quail, deer, turkey and other wildlife have increased.

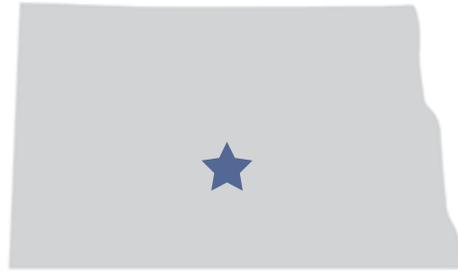
The environmental gem of K & W Farms is a spring-fed, cold-water trout stream that originates on the property. The Kaup’s stewardship of the stream has produced a strong conservation partnership with Nebraska Game and Parks and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. A dam, built in the 1950s and rebuilt in 2016, created a large pond that supports trout growth and reproduction. Originally stocked with trout in the 1970s, it has maintained a healthy population since. The pond stays open year-round, and is a refuge for local and migrating waterfowl.

Just below the dam is another short stream that is reliably fed by groundwater springs. This section supports a diverse native fish community, including both common native stream fishes and plains top minnow, one of Nebraska’s endemic species prioritized for conservation in the State Wildlife Action Plan. A next phase will concentrate on enhancing the cold-water stream, including installing fish habitat structures. ★

Presented in Partnership with



NORTH DAKOTA



MILLER RANCH



“THE MILLERS VALUE HEALTH OF THE ENTIRE ECOSYSTEM. THEY BELIEVE HEALTHY SOILS FORM THE FOUNDATION OF HEALTH FOR ALL OTHER ITEMS BUILT UPON IT: PLANTS, ANIMALS AND HUMANS. THEIR MANAGEMENT GOES WELL BEYOND CONSERVATION, EXTENDING FAR INTO THE REALM OF A HEALTHIER WHOLE SYSTEMS APPROACH THAT PROVIDES MULTIPLE LAYERS OF BENEFITS FOR EVERY LEVEL OF THE SOIL-PLANT-ANIMAL-HUMAN COMPLEX,” SAID JOSHUA DUKART, RANCHER AND CERTIFIED EDUCATOR OF HOLISTIC MANAGEMENT.

When **Ken Miller** took over the family ranch in the 80s, he knew the management practices he was taught growing up would need to evolve if he expected to pass the family ranch legacy onto his children. In 1984, Ken and his wife **Bonnie** attended a holistic resource management school in Albuquerque, New Mexico. There they began to realize that their current management had little reasoning behind it besides the fact that it was “the way things were done”.

Armed with new approaches to ranch management, the Millers began cross-fencing to turn their three pastures into eighteen to allow more recovery time between grazing. The Millers soon moved the calving date to later in the spring, and they eventually transitioned to completely no-till on their cropland while adding more diversity to their crop rotation. Each new management practice was done with one big goal in mind – to mimic and work with nature.

Today **Miller Ranch** is still a work in progress; the Millers continue to strive for improvements on their thriving land. The ranch now contains over 60 paddocks on tame and native grasslands, with 18 additional paddocks under a center pivot irrigation system. Their management techniques have allowed

them to leave more grass at the end of the grazing season than before, and they have increased carrying capacity of the ranch threefold.

The Millers strongly believe that soil makes up the foundation for everything they can accomplish in agriculture. In Ken’s words, “It’s the herd under the ground that we need to be managing.” As the family began focusing on building up the soil biology, the plants became healthier and resilient, giving their cattle more nutrition, which in turn produced healthier cattle.

Ken is a leader in his community and is keen to share what he has learned with people all over the world. He’s traveled to places as far flung as Australia to talk about what agriculture can achieve using conservation and improving soil health. As a founding member of the North Dakota Grazing Lands Coalition, Ken and his family are especially eager to share their story with fellow North Dakota ranchers. They regularly invite people to their land to learn about their practices and to experience outcomes from their innovations. ★

Presented in Partnership with



North Dakota Association of
Soil Conservation Districts



OKLAHOMA



EMMONS FARM



“I HAVE HAD THE PRIVILEGE OF WORKING WITH MANY PAST WINNERS OF THE LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD IN OTHER STATES AND I CAN SAY THAT WITHOUT A DOUBT, JIMMY IS VERY DESERVING OF BEING INDUCTED INTO THIS PRESTIGIOUS GROUP OF CONSERVATION CHAMPIONS,” SAID KEITH BERNS, PRESIDENT OF GREEN COVER SEED. “IF ALDO LEOPOLD WERE LIVING TODAY, HE AND JIMMY WOULD HAVE MUCH IN COMMON AND WOULD HAVE BEEN FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES IN THE QUEST FOR BETTER LAND STEWARDSHIP.”

Conservation has been a cornerstone of the **Emmons** family approach for generations. Back in 1934, when a big flood occurred, **Jimmy Emmons’** grandfather witnessed all of the topsoil to the depth of the plough plane had washed off into the river. The event became a personal warning sign of the need for soil and water conservation. Jimmy’s father would later experience a similar event.

When Jimmy and his wife **Ginger** took over Emmons Farm, they began implementing no-till practices on their cropland, which now includes 2,000 acres. As Jimmy learned more about other conservation practices that might benefit his land, he also started using crop rotations, cover crops and planned grazing management to reduce soil erosion from wind and water.

Jimmy was one of the first in his area to experiment with pollinator strips and companion crops to help control sugar cane aphids in grain sorghum. These tools create beneficial habitat for crucial pollinators, which in turn helps control pests without the need for insecticide. Although the yield on fields with the strips and crops was less than average, the net profit was greater since he did not need to buy insecticide.

On the livestock side of Emmons Farm, Jimmy uses planned high density stock grazing. This system mimics the way the prairie was grazed by native herbivores in the past. An innovative portable water station and portable shades designed and built on the farm, along with electric fencing, has made this grazing plan possible.

Diversifying the crop rotation has helped spread market risk and has provided the opportunity for Jimmy to capitalize on changing weather patterns. While many farmers in the area only grow one or two crops, Jimmy has taken on soybeans, cowpeas, milo, alfalfa and sunflowers.

Leadership and communication are fundamental to Jimmy; it’s important to him to preach what he practices and practice what he preaches. Over the past several years, Jimmy has hosted field days to show visitors how he manages his land. As many as 150 farmers and ranchers have come on a given day to listen to Jimmy speak. The farm also hosts scholars and visitors from around the world. ★

Presented in Partnership with



SOUTH DAKOTA



BLUE BELL RANCH



Photos: Joe Dickie, Generations Photography

“THE CONSERVATION INFLUENCE OF THE HAMANN FAMILY GOES WELL BEYOND THE BORDERS OF THE BLUE BELL RANCH. WHEN IT COMES TO INNOVATION AND COMMITMENT TO GRASSLAND STEWARDSHIP, THE HAMANNS QUIETLY LEAD BY EXAMPLE,” SAID KURT FOREMAN, SOUTH DAKOTA PARTNERS FOR FISH & WILDLIFE COORDINATOR.

When you ask **Herb Hamann** about his conservation ethic and why he goes the extra mile to improve the land, he will simply give a shrug of the shoulders and say, “It’s just the right thing to do.” Herb and his wife **Bev**, along with their children, **Breck** and **Arla**, own and manage **Blue Bell Ranch**. The family is strong in their belief that their base asset is the grassland itself, and the cows are simply the means to harvest the grass.

Working with nature is an important component of the Hamanns’ adaptation strategy. Previously calving in March or April, the family now enjoys reduced stress by calving in May. Later calving has reduced labor needs at critical times and ensures improved calf survival by avoiding harsh early spring weather. Early calving also has the added benefit of optimizing grazing opportunity to control early season invasive Kentucky bluegrass and smooth brome grass that occurs in some pastures.

The Hamanns’ livestock grazing rotations are done with consideration of ecological impacts. Their conservative grazing practices allow the persistence of key species and large areas of habitat that coincide with wildlife needs at critical times, especially nesting. Iconic grassland birds are increasingly difficult to find

in the area. But the Hamanns often observe the birds throughout the year. The family is proud of the sharp-tailed grouse and greater prairie chickens that inhabit the ranch.

In 2012, over 1,100 acres of the ranch were treated with fire for the first time in memory. To this day, Herb still talks about the long-lasting, positive effects of fire on the grasslands, cattle, wildlife and weed control. In the future, the family would like to experiment with fire again.

Over 5,000 acres of the ranch are protected under permanent easements, making Blue Bell Ranch an ecological anchor for the southern end of the Prairie Couteau Hills, which is the largest remnant of northern tallgrass prairie in the lower 48 states. For the Hamanns, enrolling land in easement programs is not about the money. In fact, the Hamanns donated 270 acres of valuable land to an easement. They were motivated by the idea that for every one acre they donated to the program, up to three acres might be protected through additional easements on other ranches. ★

Presented in Partnership with



TEXAS



DIXON WATER FOUNDATION



Photos: Texas Parks & Wildlife

Presented in Partnership with



“THE DIXON WATER FOUNDATION’S PIONEERING EFFORTS COULD NOT COME AT A BETTER TIME. AS WE SEARCH FOR WAYS TO ENHANCE FOOD, WATER AND ECONOMIC SECURITY, WHILE BUILDING RESILIENCE AND HEALTHY LANDSCAPES, THE FOUNDATION’S WORK IS CENTRAL,” SAID SANDRA POSTEL OF THE GLOBAL WATER POLICY PROJECT. “ITS COMMITMENT TO EXPERIMENTATION, DEMONSTRATION, DOCUMENTATION AND EDUCATION WILL BE KEY TO ADVANCING THE SCIENCE AND PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR REGENERATIVE GRAZING THAT TEXAS AND THE WEST WILL NEED IN THE COMING DECADES.”

Spread across north central and southwest Texas, the five working ranches owned and managed by **Dixon Water Foundation** are sights to behold. Their common mission, to promote healthy watersheds through sustainable land management to ensure that future generations have the water resources they need, has led to successful restoration of plant diversity, improved watershed conditions and wildlife habitat across all of their ranches.

The primary habitat management technique applied on all of the ranches is holistic planned grazing. The grazing practice is designed to mimic the historic grazing of large herds for short periods of time, followed by a long recovery period. Livestock are grouped together and graze a small paddock, which results in high stock density for a brief period of time. As the livestock walk, graze and provide vital nutrients through manure and urine, the soil is stimulated to more effectively cycle minerals needed for growth of desirable native plants. The foundation has become recognized for its ability to successfully implement this grazing technique which has an array of benefits.

To help maintain healthy native riparian wetland plant communities, salt cedar has been selectively removed along the creek of one of the ranches along Alamito Creek. Some mesquite has also been mechanically removed to restore the native giant sacaton plant community. Each of the ranches is involved in ongoing vegetation monitoring.

The results are used to adjust grazing management plans.

Although wildlife management is not the primary goal for the foundation, its management practices have the added benefit of providing superb habitat for wildlife without need for supplemental feeding or nesting structures. Careful management has led to better quality grasslands that better support pronghorn and 26 grassland bird species. Fifteen of these native birds are Species of Greatest Conservation Need in Texas. Visitors to the ranches are encouraged to explore the grounds and take advantage of the bird watching, hiking and opportunities for nature photography.

Dixon Water Foundation embraces education on all of their ranches. The ranches have hosted outdoor classroom events, where students are exposed to sustainable land management practices and are education on water quality, soil health and plants through hands-on activities. On the collegiate level, one of the ranches is used as a demonstration site for the Sustainable Ranching Program at Sul Ross State University. The program is the only one of its kind in Texas offering a Bachelor of Science and two-year certificate in Sustainable Ranch Management. ★

UTAH



CIRCLE BAR RANCH



“IN A TIME WHERE UTAH’S POPULATION IS GROWING, AND HUMAN CONFLICTS WITH WILDLIFE ARE BECOMING MORE CHALLENGING, I APPRECIATE FRED’S WILLINGNESS TO LOOK BEYOND HIS OWN NEEDS AND TO CONSIDER THE COLLECTIVE NEEDS OF THE PEOPLE AROUND HIM,” SAID GREGORY SHEEHAN, DIRECTOR OF UTAH DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES. “HE HAS PROVED THAT BY DOING SO, VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION EFFORTS CAN BENEFIT PRIVATE OPERATIONS WHILE ALSO BENEFITING WILDLIFE AND THE PUBLIC.”

Thomas Jefferson Thurston was the first known European to consider permanently settling the Weber River Valley in what is known today as Morgan County. When Thomas saw Morgan Valley for the first time, he was immediately drawn to its green hills, which reminded him of his Ohio home. He and his family cleared the area and settled the land that is now **Circle Bar Ranch**.

Fred Thurston, Thomas’ great-grandson, was born on this farm and has never been away for more than a week or two at a time in the past 87 years. He has farmed the land since he was a kid, going to great lengths to improve land health so it can persist into future generations. Circle Bar Ranch includes about 100 acres of irrigated pasture land and over 1,000 acres of dry farms and rangeland.

Fred has lead the charge in changing the management practices his ancestors used on the ranch. From early on, Fred figured out that in the long run, taking care of the land and natural resources will not only be more profitable, but also provide significant benefits to his fellow neighbors

in the community who want to enjoy the natural landscape around them. Starting in the 1950s, and in cooperation with officials in rangeland programs, Fred has reseeded areas in a focus area larger than 1,000 acres to support more animals while concurrently reducing soil erosion and damage.

In the past, many farmers planted on hillsides but left gullies bare, leading to erosion. Fred has focused on protecting his hillsides from further erosion by reconstructing them into grassy waterways. Hardy grasses established in the gullies slow the water flow and reduce erosion. This also keeps the runoff on the field, benefitting crop productivity.

Although dry farms usually have difficult and limited access to water, the livestock require water on the rangeland. To accommodate this, Thurston created a wildlife pond in the middle of the dry farm. After the crops are harvested, cattle feed on resulting late growth crop and grassy waterways. However, for most of the year, the pond is used by wildlife including ducks, wild turkeys, migratory birds, deer and elk. ★

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WISCONSIN



BRICKSTEAD DAIRY



“I HAVE WORKED WITH MANY PRODUCERS THROUGHOUT NORTHEASTERN WISCONSIN AND WITHOUT QUESTION, DAN BRICK IS THE UNDISPUTED LEADER IN CONSERVATION AGRICULTURE FOR THIS REGION OF THE STATE,” SAID MIKE MUSHINSKI, COUNTY CONSERVATIONIST FOR BROWN COUNTY. “I ADMIRE HIS UNWAVERING COMMITMENT TO NOT ONLY IMPLEMENT NEW AND INNOVATIVE PRACTICES, BUT TO ALSO SHARE HIS SUCCESSES AS WELL AS FAILURES.”

Established in 1848, **Brickstead Dairy** has been a family affair for five generations. Since partnering with his father in the 1990s, **Dan Brick** has expanded the dairy to include 900 cows. While the size of the dairy has changed over the years, conservation remains close to the heart of this family business and powers the pulse that keeps the farm running.

Dan’s journey to conservation started in 2011 after a spring runoff event. The loss of sediment was so severe that it left him feeling embarrassed as a farmer. He realized that the conventional practices he had been using were no longer sustainable, and that to continue farming, he would have to change his approach.

In 2014, Dan participated in the Fox Demo Farms Project, which was designed to demonstrate the effectiveness and adaptability of conservation practices to reduce soil erosion and sedimentation, control phosphorous runoff and address nonpoint source pollution issues. Although the program only required enrolling 200 acres of land, Dan was the only enrolled producer to implement no-till and cover crops on 100 percent of his land, which includes 1,500 acres.

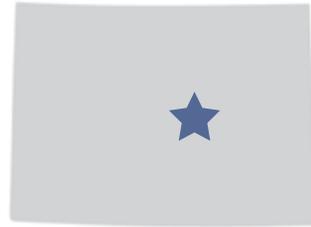
Over the past few years, Dan has committed to “plant into green.” Instead of conventionally tilling and planting into a brown field, he plants into a living cover crop such as wheat or winter rye. By planting into cover crops, Dan ensures the ground is continuously covered to help the soil and its nutrients stay on the field rather than the local waterways.

Dan has played a significant role in promoting conservation practices in his area. He acknowledges the impact agriculture has had on Green Bay’s water quality. He is committed to helping promote practices that minimize impacts on the bay. He enjoys sharing his experiences with fellow farmers in the area, as well those who are not familiar with agriculture. Dan has taken advantage of many media opportunities through his participation on Fox Demo Farms to share lessons he has learned in transitioning to a more conservation-focused farm. ★

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WYOMING



GARRETT RANCH



“THE GARRETT RANCH CONTINUOUSLY ADAPTS THEIR LAND MANAGEMENT TO ACCOUNT FOR CHANGES IN RANGE CONDITIONS,” SAID DUSTIN PORTER, PRESIDENT, AREA 66 MULE DEER INITIATIVE. “PETE AND STEVE REGULARLY SEEK NEW AND INNOVATIVE WAYS TO MODIFY THEIR GRAZING ROTATION SO AS TO LEAVE PASTURES IN BETTER CONDITION YEAR AFTER YEAR. THEY ARE NEVER AFRAID TO TRY NEW OR DIFFERENT HABITAT TREATMENTS AND HAVE THE INSIGHT TO WAIT FOR LONG-TERM BENEFITS.”

Using the money from the sale of his Texaco gas station in 1937, Labon Garrett, along with his father and grandfather, Henry and Adron, purchased the first 2,000 acres of **Garrett Ranch**. The ranch now belongs to **Pete**, Labon’s son, and Pete’s wife, **Ethel**, who manage the ranch activities with their children and grandchildren.

Garrett Ranch is located 30 miles south of Casper and still contains the original homestead property. When the ranch was established, the Garretts began with 100 head of Hereford cattle. To this day the ranch still raises Herefords. “Since Herefords paid for the ranch in 1937, I decided to keep them as the breed of cows that pay the bills every day,” Pete said. The herd has grown to 600 Herefords, grazed on over 70,000 acres of deeded and state and federally leased land, and the ranch also contains 200 acres of irrigated alfalfa along the Bates and Stinking Creek.

The Garrett’s rotational grazing system was developed with the guidance of natural resource professionals to benefit their rangeland and wildlife habitat. Their system is a reflection of the family’s conservation goals for the ranch, “to make life

easier for wildlife, livestock and people who enjoy the outdoors.” The family intends to continue to collaborate with agencies and organizations that have provided and continue to provide investments into their ranch.

Working with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, Bureau of Land Management and other non-government organizations, the Garretts began the Bolton Creek Riparian Restoration Project. The effort focused on working with nature, letting beavers create a natural, stable channel with a fully functional floodplain that reduced streambank height and erosion.

The Garretts care deeply about providing hunting and fishing opportunities on their ranch. They have a particularly soft spot in their hearts for first time hunters and elderly hunters with limited mobility, so they took it upon themselves to reserve a large stretch of Bates Creek for youth and older hunters. Much of their ranch is enrolled in the Hunter Management Area (HMA) program, adding to large parcels of public and private lands that are open to the public for the benefit of sportsmen. ★

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KANSAS

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MISSOURI

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Merchandising Council
Missouri Cattlemen's
Association
Missouri Corn
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Electric Cooperatives
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and Water Conservation
Districts
Missouri Soil and Water
Conservation Program
USDA NRCS

NEBRASKA

Nebraska Cattlemen
Cargill
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Rainwater Basin Joint
Venture
World Wildlife Fund –
Northern Great Plains
Program
Tri-State Generation and
Transmission Association
Green Cover Seed
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USDA NRCS
Nebraska Audubon Society
Nebraska Game and
Parks Commission

NORTH DAKOTA

North Dakota Grazing
Lands Coalition
North Dakota
Association of Soil
Conservation Districts
North Dakota
Stockmen's Association
North Dakota Game
Fish & Parks
Starion Financial
Audubon Dakota
North Dakota Natural
Resources Trust
Ducks Unlimited, Inc.
World Wildlife Fund -
Northern Great Plains
Program
APEX Clean Energy
Delta Waterfowl
Basin Electric
Cow Chip Ranch
Dakota Community Bank
& Trust
Nature Conservancy
North Dakota
North Dakota
Department of Health
Slope Electric
Wildlife Society, North
Dakota Chapter
Society for Range
Management, North
Dakota Chapter
Roughrider Electric
KEM
Pheasants Forever, Inc.

OKLAHOMA

Noble Research institute
Oklahoma Cattlemen
ITC
Oklahoma Farming &
Ranching Foundation
Oklahoma State
University

SOUTH DAKOTA

South Dakota Cattlemen's
Association
South Dakota Grasslands
Coalition
First Dakota National Bank
South Dakota Department
of Agriculture
South Dakota Department
of Environment and
Natural Resources -
Discovery Center
South Dakota
Department of Game,
Fish & Parks
South Dakota Farm Bureau
Federation
South Dakota State
University Foundation
World Wildlife Fund -
Northern Great Plains
Program
Bad River Ranches
Belle Fourche River
Watershed Partnership
Ducks Unlimited,
South Dakota
Jim & Carol Faulstich
Millborn Seeds, Inc.
Pheasants Forever,
South Dakota

Professional Alliance
South Dakota Association
of Conservation Districts
The Nature Conservancy
South Dakota
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USDA NRCS
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Federation
Western AgCredit
Utah Cattlemen's
Association
Producers Livestock
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WISCONSIN

Wisconsin Milk
Marketing Board
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American Transmission
Company
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Association
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WYOMING

Wyoming Stockgrowers
Association
World Wildlife
Fund – Northern Great
Plains Program
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Tri-State Generation and
Transmission Association



Past Recipients

★ CALIFORNIA

- 2016
LONE STAR RANCH
Mark and Dina Moore
- 2015
PRATHER RANCH
Jim and Mary Rickert
- 2014
FULL BELLY FARM
Andrew Brait, Paul Muller,
Judith Redmond and Dru
Rivers
- 2013
GIACOMINI DAIRY
Bob, Karen, Diana, Lynn
and Jill Giacomini
- 2012
GIACOMAZZI DAIRY
Dino and Julie
Giacomazzi
- 2011
KOOPMANN RANCH
Tim Koopmann
- 2010
MONTNA FARMS
Al Montna
- 2009
RED ROCK RANCH
John Diener
- 2008
THREE CREEKS RANCH
Chet Vogt
- 2007
SIERRA ORCHARDS
Craig and Julie
McNamara
- 2006
LANGETWINS
WINE ESTATES
Brad and Randy Lange

★ COLORADO

- 2016
STACKED LAZY 3 RANCH
Keven and Sandi Turecek
- 2015
FLYING DIAMOND RANCH
Johnson Family
- 2014
TURKEY CREEK RANCH
Walker Family
- 2013
VISINTAINER SHEEP CO.
Dean and Gary
Visintainer
- 2012
WINEINGER-DAVIS
RANCH
Russell and Tricia Davis
- 2011
PIPE SPRINGS RANCH
McEndree Family
- 2010
STANKO RANCH
Jim and Jo Stanko
- 2009
MESA DE MAYA RANCH
John and Carolyn Doherty
- 2008
COLEMAN RANCH
Jim, Frances, Tim and
Teddi Coleman
- 2007
SAN ISABEL RANCH
Mike and Sara Shields,
Bet Kettle
- 2006
BOHART RANCH
Dick and Sandra Tanner
- 2005
MCNEIL RANCH
Mike and Cathy McNeil
- 2004
RUSK HEREFORD RANCH
Randy and Claricy Rusk

★ KANSAS

- 2016
CAPPS RANCH
Frankie and Sue
Menegatti
- 2016
2S LAND & CATTLE
Randy and Nicole Small
- 2015
SPOUL RANCH
Sproul Family

★ KENTUCKY

- 2016
TURNER FAMILY FARMS
Mark and June Turner
- 2015
WEST WIND FARM
Charlie Williams
- 2014
SPRINGHILL FARMS
Peery Family
- 2013
SHERWOOD ACRES
FARMS
Jon and Sylvia Bednarski

★ NEBRASKA

- 2016
PLUM THICKET FARMS
Rex and Nancy Peterson
- 2015
SHAW FAMILY FARMS
Shaw Family
- 2014
PELSTER ANGUS
RANCH
Pelster Family
- 2013
BEEL RANCH
Beel Family
- 2012
SHOVEL DOT RANCH
Buell Family

- 2011
RGM CORPORATION
Mathewson Family

- 2010
KALKOWSKI FAMILY
RANCHES
Kalkowski Family

- 2009
BLUESTEM VALLEY
FARMS
Lyle and Alice Sittler,
Kristen and Todd
Eggerling

- 2008
CALF CREEK AND 4-O
RANCHES
A.B.Cox

- 2007
CHRISTEN RANCH
Rod and Amy Christen

- 2006
WILSON RANCH
Blaine and Bryan Wilson

★ NORTH DAKOTA

- 2016
BLACK LEG RANCH
Jerry and Renae Doan

SOUTH DAKOTA

- 2016
CRONIN FARMS
Mike and Monty Cronin
- 2015
JORGENSEN LAND AND
CATTLE PARTNERSHIP
Jorgensen Family
- 2014
ROCK HILLS RANCH
Perman Family
- 2013
GUPTILL ANGUS
Guptill Family
- 2012
KOPRIVA ANGUS
Kopriva Family