Hanson, fourth-generation farmer, wins 2024 Kansas Bankers award

Scott Hanson stands on the land west of Concordia where he built a waterway.

The Hanson family (l-r): Callie, Scott, Brynna, Amber, and Haddie.

BY RUSSELL GAGNON

Scott Hanson is proud to be a fourth-generation farmer in north central Kansas, and honored to receive the Kansas Bankers Association Soil Conservation Award. "I started farming in 2014, but I've grown up around it, been around it, my whole life," Hanson said. "It's just been a trade of the family for a long time."

The Hanson family is no stranger to conservation awards. "My father won the award in 2009, so it's kind of neat to have that award, too," Hanson said.

Hanson, who received an associate's degree from Cloud County Community College and a Bachelor's degree in Ag Business from Kansas State University, is not a newcomer to soil conservation practices. "I've been practicing no-till on most of my land since I started farming," he said. "I also do cover crops."

No-till farming is one of the most common forms of soil conservation. No-till protects soil from erosion by leaving crop residue in the field, and allows organic matter to accumulate, which improves soil health. It can also improve the habitat for beneficial insects and wildlife by providing ground cover.

Cover crops are plants grown to cover the soil, primarily to improve soil health and water quality. They are often planted after the main crop harvest and before the next main crop is planted.

Other forms of conservation include crop rotation, contour farming, terracing, windbreaks, conservation tillage, residue management, and buffer strips. Conservation tillage includes in-row subsoiling, strip-till, and ridge-till practices.

In addition to no-till farming and cover crops, Hanson has also built waterways and built or repaired terraces on his land. "We tried to fix the terraces that we needed to, and we established a few grass-seeded waterways. It's never really done. There's still a lot of work ahead."

His latest waterway project took two years. "The water just wasn't going where it needed to," Hanson said. "There was significant erosion loss. So we reestablished a waterway that was overgrown. Now the water is flowing where it once was. It turned out good."

Hanson, who is also the board secretary for the Cloud County Coop Elevator Association, embraces the demands that come with farming. "I like the challenges that agriculture brings," he said. "There are a lot of things that are out of your control, like the weather. But you try to do all you can for the things that you can control. There's a lot of diversity in agriculture. There's not one cookie-cutter approach to every problem. Sometimes you have to think outside the box."

Hanson is honored to receive the conservation award. "It makes you feel good that somebody else notices what you're doing," he said. "We try to do all the conservation we can, so it's good to be noticed."

Hanson is also proud of what the award means to his family. "I have a lot of memories of the farm growing up. Now I have a family of my own and they see some of that. You have to work hard for what you get, and so for them to see a project through from beginning to end is great for them."

The Cloud County Soil Conservation Awards banquet will be February 6th, 2025, at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish Hall at 6:30 p.m.

Members of the Board of Supervisors for the Cloud County Conservation District, from left to right: Michael Richard, Loren Swenson, Keevan Portenier, Tim Sjogren, and Tyler Tobald.

Cloud County Conservation District serving Cloud County since February 1945

BY TUCKER ASHBURN

In February, the Cloud County Conservation District will be entering its 80th year of service, originally being chartered on February 25, 1945.

Leading the charge in conserving the earth of Cloud County is the District, and at the head of the district is the Board of Supervisors.

The members of the board are Keevan Portenier, who is the current chairperson and has been for eight years; Loren Swenson, vice-chairperson for 10 years; Tyler Tobald, treasurer for three years; Michael Richard, member of the board for five years; and Tim Sjogren, member of the board for one year.

Swenson, a retired farmer and current soil health coach for Glacial Hills Resources Conservation and Development, got into conservation after experiencing some droughts during his time in Kansas, “We would have these droughts, we would have this heat, and we would wonder ‘what can I grow, what can I do to minimize the droughts’,” said Swenson. “I want to cut back on all the chemicals that we use. Chemicals are killing us, all the roundups, the herbicides, pesticides that we put on all our food”. Swenson hopes that in the future that people can be rewarded for producing and consuming healthy foods, “I want to see healthy food. I want to see farmers get paid for growing healthy food and when we have healthy food we will have healthy people”.

Tobald, a farmer at his family farm and ranch, JTAC Farms, also posts on social media about topics regarding soil health, cattle, and other farm topics. Tobald got into conservation with the pragmatic approach that farming and life begins and ends with the soil. “The soil is our money-maker,” said Tobald. “If we deplete/destroy our soil, all the work over the generations will be lost and our area will continue to wither away”. He hopes that farmers and ranchers will be able to leave the world better than when they found it, “If we as our local Conservation District can aid people in better adapting different practices and figuring out what works for them and their operation, it's a worthwhile investment if it makes our soil healthier. We can not keep doing things the way they've always been done. Though we have made steps in the right direction over the past couple decades, we as a nation still lose, on average, seven tons of topsoil per acre, every year. That is completely unsustainable.”

Richard, a farmer for both his family and rented farms, works alongside his wife Linda and two sons, Casey and AJ. Richard believes in conservation with the belief that the soil is the lifeblood of all farming, “Soil is what creates and builds farms,” said Richard. “Conservation, building and retaining soils is the life blood of all farms. Many practices are available to help all farmers build and retain soil on their farms.” He hopes that farmers will be able to use tools and practices to improve and conserve the soil of their farms.

K-State geography and agronomy researchers to build climate resilience in ag-based communities

MANHATTAN — Kansas State University scientists are collaborating with colleagues in Iowa, Nebraska and Arkansas to advance weather intelligence, strengthen climate resilience and address the impacts of environmental change in agriculture-based communities.

Xiaomao Lin, professor of agronomy and state climatologist for Kansas, and Abigail Langston, assistant professor of geography, are leading K-State's participation in a multi-institutional project funded by the National Science Foundation, or NSF.

The project, Data-Advanced Research and Education to improve weather intelligence and localized climate change assessment and resilience in agriculture-based communities, focuses on developing tools and strategies to help communities adapt to the challenges of climate change.

Lin and Langston are working with researchers from the University of Iowa, which is the lead institution, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the University of Arkansas to create a comprehensive Data-Advanced Research and Education, or DARE, infrastructure that integrates teaching, research, extracurricular activities, community engagement and communication to identify, assess and mitigate the localized impacts of climate change, including environmental justice issues.

"This collaborative project aims to enhance data acquisition through a citizen science observation network, which will improve the spatial coverage and real-time capacity for weather and soil observations," Lin said. "Kansas faces some of the most diverse and extreme weather hazards in the world — from severe storms with large hail and tornadoes to blizzards, ice storms, relentless winds, heat waves and drought. These hazards affect our communities and economies in profound ways."

Langston said one of the main goals is to build long-term educational relationships with students across Kansas at high school, community college and university levels.

"Students in ag-based communities witness first-hand extreme weather events that directly impact their communities and their livelihoods," Langston said. "I expect we will learn at least as much from students and community members as they do from us. We are currently planning our 2025 summer camp that will give students a hands-on experience with measuring climate variables in the field and analyzing climate data in the lab."

K-State will receive $800,000 over four years from the NSF as part of a nearly $6 million grant from the foundation's Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research, or EPSCoR, Research Infrastructure Improvement-Focused Collaborations Program. The program supports interdisciplinary research teams working across jurisdictions to advance climate change research and build resilience in disproportionately affected communities nationwide.

"This collaborative, multi-institutional project leverages K-State's expertise in addressing climate change within agricultural communities," said Hans Coetzee, interim vice president for research. "The outcomes of this work have the potential to drive a transformative approach to tackling environmental challenges across Kansas and the broader Midwest region."

Invite Birds, Bats and Butterflies to Your Yard

Providing food, water, protective cover and nesting sites is a great way to help local bird populations. Those actions will also give the homeowner opportunities for learning and entertainment. Over 650 bird species nest in North America. Improving their habitat can increase populations of both resident bird species and migratory species that stop by as they travel from one location to another. Try to provide food, shelter, and nesting sites for five or six bird species that need the most support. Go to www.audubonathome.org/birdstohelp for more information.

Bird feeders and a source of water will attract the most common bird species to your yard. But the best way to attract AND help most birds is to plant native trees, shrubs and wildflowers. Call your local NRCS office for information on native plants suited to your site.

There are 47 bat species flying the nighttime skies in the United States! They are consuming 30 – 50 % of their body weight in insects each night. Other bats eat fruit and nectar and play an important pollinator role. For bat house designs and more information, visit www.audubonathome.org/bats.

Butterflies will visit your yard if you plant flowering plants for them to eat as adults and host plants for their eggs and caterpillars. The size of the yard doesn't matter to the over 700 butterfly species in the United States.

Native solitary bees are declining in numbers, but you can help them by building a bee box. Drill small holes into an untreated block of wood. Tying a bundle of dried stems together also provides habitat. Most of the bees that pollinate native plants do not live together in hives.

Stop by the Jewell County Conservation District office, 105 W. South St., Mankato, for an informational handout titled An Invitation To A Healthy Yard, printed by Audubon and the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

We also have **FREE SAMPLES** of a Kansas Pollinator Seed Mix available. This mix includes Maximillian Sunflower, Upright Prairie Coneflower, Lemon Mint, Purple Coneflower, False Sunflower, Black-eyed Susan, Wild Bergamot, Gray-head Coneflower, and Stiff Goldenrod, plus three milkweeds: Common, Showy and Butterfly.

Folk-country duet to perform at annual conservation meeting

Taylor Kline will entertain on Thursday, February 6 at the Cloud County Conservation District Annual Meeting and Bankers Award program.

The supper begins at 6:30 p.m., followed by the meeting and program at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church Parish Hall, 307 East Fifth Street in Concordia.

Reservations are required for the complimentary supper and must be made by Feb. 3. Reservations may be made by calling 785-243-1509, ext. 3.

Kline has been playing live music around the Midwest for over 10 years, as a solo act as well as with various groups. He is now joined by his darling, Mandy Kary, as a folk-country duet. They focus on Taylor's original music, but have a wide variety of classic covers from different genres that span the last six decades. Accompanied by acoustic guitar, harmonica, mandolin, piano and dual harmonies, they provide more energy than your typical duo.

The couple resides in the Salina area and are currently booking shows wherever they are wanted.

The Bird Connection

EMILY FONKEN/BLADE-EMPIRE

Conservation of natural resources requires the maintenance of the many species which work together to create a healthy ecosystem. Native plants are very important in holding the ecosystem together, but plants are closely connected with native birds, and the 2022 U.S. State of the Birds report showed that more than half of the birds in the United States are in decline.

According to Peter Marra, a 2022 State of the Birds science committee member and director of the Earth Commons at Georgetown University Institute for Environment and Sustainability, "We're basically watching the process of the sixth mass extinction."

Plants benefit from native birds in different ways. Some birds, such as hummingbirds, help with pollination. Other birds eat seeds, and when the seeds are not digested and come out in the birds' droppings, it helps to create new plants in different areas, as well as providing fertilizer for the soil.

Birds need plants for nesting places and safety from predators. They also eat the seeds, fruit, and nuts that come from plants. In addition, they eat insects, lizards, snakes, and other animals that feed on plants.

Grassland birds, such as the Western Meadowlark, the state bird of Kansas, are at high risk. The American Bird Conservancy estimates that between 1970 and 2014, 77 percent of the Eastern Meadowlark population has declined, and Western Meadowlarks are facing the same challenges.

Meadowlarks eat grubs, grasshoppers, caterpillars and ants, all of which can pose a threat to crops. However, the use of pesticides to kill insects has reduced the food supply, and mowing and the use of herbicides along roadsides and cropland also destroys habitat. The harvesting of hayfields or waterways during nesting season has also had a negative impact on meadowlarks and other native birds.

Climate change is also affecting native birds, as are human actions such as the expanding of agriculture, unsustainable forest management and introduced species.

According to Cornell Lab, one conservation method would involve reducing lawns by planting native species. It estimates that in the United States alone, there are 63 millions acres of lawn. Lawns do not support wildlife, and planting native plants instead has the potential to make a big difference, offering nesting opportunities as well as food sources.

Many people also use pesticides and herbicides on lawns and crop fields. Cornell estimates that one billion pounds of pesticides are used in the United States each year. Many common pesticides, such as 2, 4-D and glyphosate, can be toxic to wildlife, either through contact, the destruction of food sources or by eating contaminated prey.

According to Audubon, it has been studied and well documented that birds are excellent biodiversity indicators and the United States is eighth globally for the largest number of threatened species.

"Protecting wildlife and biodiversity is something that everybody should be concerned with," says Marra. "Once we save birds, we're going to save a lot of other species that we share the earth with."

K-State researcher touts benefits of winter wheat in crop rotation

Lollato says crop's value extends beyond grain

BY JACOB KLAUDT
K-State Research and Extension

MANHATTAN, Kan. — Kansas State University wheat specialist Romulo Lollato says farmers should consider what they might be missing when choosing to leave winter wheat out of their usual crop rotations.

Lollato notes that wheat acres in Kansas have been decreasing at a rate of approximately 2% every year since 2005. Nationally, that decline remains at about 1.5%. Often, he said, management decisions are based solely on the crop's profitability.

However, sidelining this crop may result in growers passing over the benefits of winter wheat in multiple areas of agricultural production, such as planting, fertilizing and grazing.

According to Lollato, producers can obtain more flexibility in cropping systems when planting winter wheat. Specifically, winter wheat has a broader planting window when compared to summer crops.

"In regions where the winter is a little warmer, there is more time to plant the wheat crop and still reach your maximum yield potential for that area," he said. "Some of our research (at K-State) shows that you have as much as 50–60 days to reach that yield potential in south-central Kansas."

Beyond planting, growers have more freedom when fertilizing fields. Plants use most of the nitrogen available for growth in the spring, so Lollato said producers have an approximate six-month window after planting in September to put out fertilizer without losing efficacy.

"Timing is important," he said. "The closer you administer nitrogen to the stem elongation phase is typically better regarding the nitrogen's effectiveness."

He added: "A large fertilizer window allows producers to match up applications with optimum weather and it ensures the nitrogen has time to get incorporated into the root zone and reduce losses."

Additionally, diversified producers raising livestock benefit from planting winter wheat for grazing.

"Growing this dual-purpose crop provides quite a bit of high-quality forage during a time of the year when others are less available – like late fall, winter and early spring," Lollato said.

While the price of the actual grain can be less than ideal some years, incorporating winter wheat into crop rotations allows for double-cropping or growing two or more crops in the same field simultaneously, which opens up other economic possibilities.

"In many operations, if we're dealing with summer crops, we can grow just one crop each year," Lollato said. "If we introduce a winter wheat crop in that system, we can grow three crops in two years, depending on where we are."

"The possibility of intensifying the system like that and being able to produce – on average – more than one cash crop annually plays a huge role in profitability."

Other advantages of having winter wheat in crop rotations:

Weed suppression.
Moisture conservation.
Carbon sequestration.

To help communicate the positives of winter wheat, Lollato and the vice president of research and operations at Kansas Wheat, Aaron Harries, have launched an information campaign called "Wheat: Beyond the Value of the Grain." More information about this movement is available online.

Volunteer trees need to be controlled now

K-State horticulture experts shares how to prevent and control volunteer trees

K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. — During December, many homeowners are focused on Christmas trees, but Kansas State University horticulture expert Cynthia Domenghini said there are other trees to be thinking about.

"Though trees are a vital part of our landscapes, there are situations where volunteer trees need to be controlled," Domenghini said.

Volunteer trees are saplings that grow from seeds by themselves. Often the issue is the wrong plant in the wrong place, such as home lawns.

"If the tree is still small and a desirable species, you may want to consider transplanting in the spring," Domenghini said.

Active control measures can be taken if the tree is not desirable. Most trees resprout after cutting, but those that don't, can be effectively controlled by cutting. Domenghini listed a few examples of common species that do resprout after being cut:

· Siberian Elm.
· Hackberry.
· Osage Orange.
· Oak.
· Ash.
· Aspen.
· Cottonwood.
· Maple.
· Sycamore.
· Willow.

Tree species that do resprout after cutting call for different control methods. "These trees will either need to be dug out or the cut stump treated with herbicide after cutting," Domenghini said.

Domenghini said the recommendations she gives to control volunteer trees are only for those that come from seeds rather than suckers that originate from the roots of an existing tree.

"Using herbicides on suckers will damage and very possibly kill the original tree," Domenghini said. "Trees that commonly produce suckers include tree of heaven, honey locust, black locust, western soapberry, cottonwood, aspen, poplar, willow and boxelder."

According to Domenghini, the most commonly available herbicides are triclopyr and glyphosate. Roundup is a common name for an herbicide that contains glyphosate, while triclopyr is found in many brush killers.

Osage orange trees are often found in fields, particularly in areas that have been overgrazed.

"Read the label before purchasing to make sure that a stump treatment is listed," Domenghini said. "Most often the undiluted or lightly diluted product is applied to the stump immediately after cutting."

Regardless of the herbicide used, it is important to treat the stump immediately or within five minutes of cutting.

"Trees do not need to be actively growing to be controlled," Domenghini said. "Actually this time of year is a very good time to treat as long as applications are made when the temperature is about freezing."

Domenghini and her colleagues in K-State's Department of Horticulture and Natural Resources produce a weekly Horticulture Newsletter with tips for maintaining home landscapes and gardens.

Interested persons can subscribe to the newsletter, as well as send their garden and yard-related questions to hortsupport@ksu.edu, or contact your local K-State Research and Extension office.

Grazing cover crops benefits soil health

BY KELSEY STREMEL

Kansas State University researchers have found that grazing cover crops can improve soil health in no-till dryland cropping systems, addressing a key concern for producers in water-limited environments like the central Great Plains.

The study, conducted from 2018 to 2021 across three producer fields in central and western Kansas, found that grazing cover crops with beef cattle had no negative effects on soil's physical or chemical properties compared to ungrazed cover crops. In fact, researchers observed increases in soil organic carbon stocks and potassium concentrations in grazed plots.

"These findings are significant for producers looking to integrate livestock into their cropping systems," said Logan Simon, an agronomist at the Southwest Research-Extension Center in Garden City. "Grazing cover crops at moderate stocking rates with adequate post-grazing regrowth can be a viable strategy for intensifying no-till dryland cropping systems while maintaining or improving soil health."

Simon said a common concern among producers is the potential for soil compaction due to grazing. This research found no negative impacts on key soil physical properties when stocking rate and duration of cover crop grazing were managed. Soil bulk density, penetration resistance, water-stable aggregates, and wind-erodible fractions were comparable between grazed and ungrazed plots, he said.

Soil organic carbon stocks increased in grazed plots, attributed to manure deposition and retained plant residue, leading to improved soil structure and reduced erosion potential, highlighting broader soil health benefits.

"This research demonstrates that integrating livestock grazing with cover crops can be a win-win, supporting both agricultural productivity and environmental sustainability," Simon said.

The study also found that cover crop biomass left as residue after grazing was similar to pre-grazing levels, with approximately 60% of ungrazed biomass retained due to regrowth after the grazing period. This level of residue retention aligns with Natural Resources Conservation Service recommendations and helps maintain soil protection while still providing valuable forage for livestock.

Sites were grazed over a 30-40-day period, allowing for approximately 40-50% removal of cover crop biomass and cover crop regrowth after the grazing rotation. Simon said it is important to note that results from similar studies are likely to vary based on grazing animal stocking rate, categories, duration of grazing, and available cover crop biomass for grazing.

Hope For Grasslands

Grasslands are the least protected habitat on earth

- THE NATURE CONSERVANCY

Imagine a Kansas where grasslands flourish:

The land, once depleted, now pulses with life. Native species reclaim their habitat, ensuring a resilient ecosystem for future generations. Healthy prairies capture carbon in the soil, slowing the impact of a changing climate and creating a healthier future for us all. Ranchers are finally recognized as proud environmental champions—their continued stewardship and adoption of conservation practices not only sustains their livelihoods, but also secures a legacy of abundance.

Our current reality is starker. Grasslands are the least protected habitat on earth. They are rapidly disappearing due to urban sprawl, woody invasion, conversion to cropland and energy development. Over 30 years, a rancher in western Kansas might expect to make about $17 per acre, per year, to keep the grass "green side up". Compare that to the potential profits of developing the land: $76/acre per year if plowed and converted it to crops, $167/acre per year to turn it into a ranchette or feedlot, as much as $800/acre per year to turn it into a solar farm. When landowners are asked to wrestle with these economic scenarios, it's no surprise why we continue to lose grasslands every day. But The Nature Conservancy has hope and the ecosystems services that enrich our lives have value.

Through our Generational Grasslands program in the Southern High Plains, we are working to conserve grasslands at scale by focusing resources into the few remaining grassland cores, centering the needs of communities and breaking down barriers through creative solutions that ensure both people and nature thrive.

Quote: Matt Bain

Grasslands store immense quantities of carbon underground in the soil and keep it from being released into the atmosphere. But if a prairie is plowed, much of that carbon is released. Avoiding the conversion of grasslands in places like the Flint Hills, supporting ecologically-sound fire practices and restoring grasslands where they have been lost are important natural climate solutions. Combined with reducing reliance on fossil fuels and accelerating well-sited renewable energy, natural climate solutions offer immediate and cost-effective ways to tackle the climate crisis—while also addressing biodiversity loss and supporting human health and livelihoods. Learn more about natural climate solutions here.

Additional $1 million

- KANSASFARMER

Kansas Gov. Laura Kelly announced Aug. 16 that an additional $1 million has been directed to conservation districts across Kansas to support practices that will reduce erosion, promote water conservation and mitigate the effects of the ongoing drought. This is in addition to the $3.5 million distributed each year for similar conservation efforts.

Funding is provided by the Kansas Department of Agriculture Division of Conservation (KDA DOC) through an appropriation from the State Water Plan Fund. The program is administered by conservation districts across the state.

"The state continues to seek funding for conservation efforts that can maximize water resources and help make agricultural practices for farmers and ranchers more efficient and sustainable," said Mike Beam, Kansas secretary of agriculture.

The additional funding is available to landowners and producers interested in eligible water resource practices such as irrigation water management, nutrient management, planting cover crops, livestock water supplies, cross fencing, and abandoned well plugging. Contact your local conservation district at agriculture.ks.gov/conservationdistricts.

The Dark Side of Light

EMILY FONKEN
Concordia Blade-Empire

When the topic of conservation comes up, the subject typically revolves around conserving soil and water. However, light pollution, and how it is affecting the planet, is one very important environmental issue.

Light pollution affects all species, flora or fauna, whether on land or under water. The ecosystem has always relied on a cycle of daylight and the darkness of night. The darkness of night provides protection to many species, and as that decreases, the risk of predation increases, leading to the decline of many species. According to DarkSky International, a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting the planet by reducing light pollution, "Scientific evidence suggests that artificial light at night has negative and deadly effects on many creatures, including amphibians, birds, mammals, insects, and plants."

The decline of the game bird population is frequently a topic which arises when discussing conservation, and nighttime light pollution has a large impact on all varieties of birds. Not only does light at night cause birds to stay up later and wake earlier, it also affects migration patterns, which can cause the birds to become confused and lose their way, at times causing death.

Artificial light can also cause birds to migrate too early or too soon, which in turn can affect foraging and nesting activities. Many cities around the world are beginning to adopt plans to turn off building lights at night in order to help solve the problem.

Light pollution also affects insects, and insect populations affect plants, birds, both game birds and songbirds, bats and mammals, including humans. The insect population around the world is declining. Many insects are beneficial to humans, especially pollinators, and others, considered pests to many humans, are necessary to sustain other species.

Overuse of pesticides, habitat loss due to human activity, and climate change are some of the main causes, but light pollution is also a major contributor. As with many other species, food sources, life cycles, habitat, predation and reproduction of insects are all altered due to light pollution. In addition, many insects are drawn to artificial light and then killed immediately.

Light pollution also affects human health, causing a multitude of health problems. The production of melatonin is affected by light and this can affect sleep patterns, leading to sleep deprivation. Headaches, stress, anxiety, and many other health problems have been linked to light pollution.

Light pollution is entirely manmade. Therefore, humans have the capability to reduce light emissions. Using outdoor lighting only when necessary and utilizing more motion sensors can help, as well as making sure outdoor lights are shielded from upward illumination. According to an article by National Geographic, most outdoor lighting is poorly positioned, sending wasted electricity into the sky, and many states are adopting legislation to control outdoor lighting.

A Standout Year for Prescribed Fire

- THE NATURE CONSERVANCY

Grassland fires are a natural part of the Kansas landscape, and are used by landowners to maintain the health of their grasslands:

Fire is a natural part of the tallgrass prairie ecosystem, helping to maintain its diversity and stability. Before European settlement, fires occurred every 1–5 years.

Landowners and managers use prescribed burns to reduce the risk of wildfires, control brush and trees, and increase forage value. The prescribed burn season in Kansas runs from late February to mid-April.

Fire tolerance

Most grasses can tolerate or even benefit from fire because they grow at or below the ground. Without fire, shrubs and trees would take over the grasslands.

Grasslands evolved with fire, both natural wildfires and intentional use by Native caretakers before colonization. Today, prescribed fire remains a crucial tool for maintaining and enhancing prairie health. The Nature Conservancy has been a leader in using prescribed fire for more than 60 years to keep aggressive invasive plants at bay, enrich soil health and support thriving ranching economies.

Throughout the year, our highly trained burn crews can be seen preparing for and setting prescribed fires on TNC preserves. They also help private landowners and our conservation partners, like the National Park Service and Konza Prairie Biological Research Station, burn at the right place, right time of the year and right frequency through the co-creation of burn plans, equipment sharing and technical support.

"Woody plant encroachment and herbaceous invasive species pose critical threats to the resilience of Kansas prairies. It has never been more important to work with our conservation partners to ensure frequent fire to maintain open grassland," says Flint Hills Initiative Manager Tony Capizzo. We're working to do just that. The Kansas chapter has one of the most impactful fire programs at the Conservancy, burning approximately 37,800 acres last year—more than any other state.

Well-managed rangeland is beneficial to both livestock and wildlife

Native grass areas are a major part of the agricultural scene in Kansas. Properly managing range land is necessary for both short-term and long-term productivity and economic return to a grazing operation. When rangeland is well managed, both livestock and wildlife benefit. Wildlife use of native grasses is well documented. Rangelands are used for nesting, rearing young, feeding and winter cover.

Fire has been one of the most important ecological factors as true prairies have evolved. Producers can use fire to increase desirable warm season grasses and forbs to benefit both livestock and wildlife such as quail, rabbits, prairie chickens, and pheasants. If fire is eliminated from a range management program, an invasion of woody vegetation and cool season grasses is likely.

A rotational grazing system allows grasses to maintain or even increase their growth and vigor during the season. Enough of the plant remains at some time during the year to provide good wildlife cover.

In Summary: Well-managed rangeland can have several environmental benefits over tilled land. Soil erosion is dramatically decreased. The use of pesticides and fertilizers also decreases. Well-managed rangeland also acts as a filter strip to protect or improve water quality. Many wildlife species depend on good quality rangeland for their existence.

Grazing crop stubble can extend feed resources

K-State beef cattle veterinarians offer tips for producers turning out the herd on crop fields post-harvest

BY LISA MOSER
K-State Research and Extension

MANHATTAN, Kan. — Eating leftovers is a way for people to save money while still getting nutritious food. For beef producers, one way to extend the grazing days is to turn cattle out on crop fields after harvest, according to the veterinarians at the Kansas State University Beef Cattle Institute.

Addressing this topic on a recent Cattle Chat podcast were K-State veterinarians Brad White, Bob Larson and Scott Fritz, who specializes in veterinary toxicology.

"Crop stubble is a great feed resource for cattle, but it is a resource that will decrease in nutrient quality the longer the cattle are in the field," Larson said. "When cattle are first turned out, there is often a lot of leaves on the plants, but over time cattle will strip those leaves off."

Larson recommends beef producers monitor the grazing fields and offer supplements to the herd as needed.

White agreed, adding: "The cow herd will likely need to be supplemented with protein later in the winter."

And while they agree that crop stubble can be a valuable feed resource, there are risks to be aware of, Fritz said.

"In a dry year, drought-stressed forages can accumulate nitrate and can poison the cattle, so it is important to do a field test in arid parts of the country," he said.

By contrast, Fritz said overly wet fields also pose a risk.

"Cattle turned out on flooded fields can be exposed to mold growth that leads to mycotoxin issues," he said.

Before turning the cattle out on the crop stubble, Fritz recommends walking through the field to assess the quality of the field and look for grain spills.

"One problem a lot of people overlook is a pile of corn that got spilled in the field when loading the grain cart. If a cow eats 20-30 pounds of grain, she will get acidosis, and if it is a pile of soybeans, the (opposite) happens and they can end up with a neurologic disease," he said.

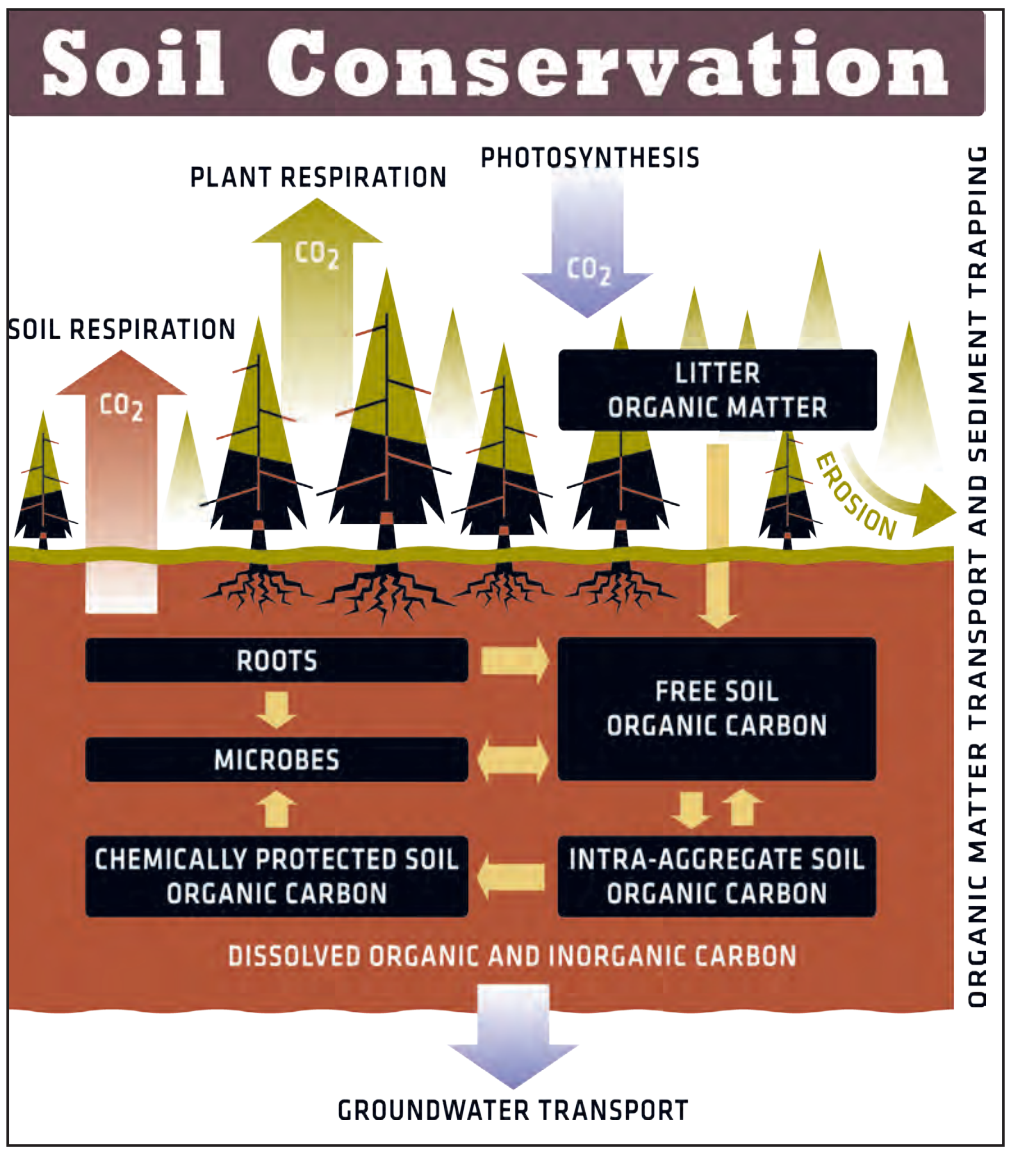
Along with inspecting the field for spills, Fritz recommends that producers also evaluate water sources and grass strips.

"Make sure that whether it is surface water or a dedicated underground source, it is functioning before the cows are turned out," Fritz said.

White added: "It is a good idea to give the water source a flush through, so you know the cattle are getting clean, fresh water."

The last thing to check for when inspecting the field is the grass strips that might be full of weeds. "When putting up the hot wire around the field, make sure there are no noxious plants in the grass strips," Fritz said.

To hear the full discussion, listen to Cattle Chat on your preferred streaming platform.



Cloud County Conservation District

Annual Meeting

Thursday, Feb. 6 at 6:30 p.m.

Our Lady of Perpetual Help
Catholic Church Parish Hall

307 East 5th Street ~ Concordia

Reservations for the free dinner
made by calling (785) 243-1509, ext. 3.
Reservations needed by February 3, 2025.

Door Prizes

Soil Conservation Award Presented to:

Scott Hanson

All Cloud County producers & landowners are invited to join us for this celebration of natural resource conservation.

Congratulations Soil Conservation Winners!