

CHANGING GRAZING TO RESTORE GRASSLANDS



Participating ranches, retailers, and target states in Audubon's Conservation Ranching Program.

Until last year, Loy Sneary firmly believed that anything growing at his ranch 80 miles south of Houston, other than the Bermuda grass his cattle grazed on, was competing for water and soil nutrients and had to go.

And why wouldn't he believe this? He went to good agriculture schools and his family

has been ranching in Texas for four generations. Spending \$30-40 an acre on herbicides, insecticides, and mowing "weeds" was his norm.

Loy started exploring grassfed beef opportunities and his curiosity led him to Audubon's Conservation Ranching Program, a market-based incentive program that benefits ranchers who voluntarily improve grassland bird habitat. Through meetings and site visits, he learned terms like "high-density stocking rate" and "adaptive grazing", which essentially means sectioning a ranch into small paddocks that cattle move between daily on a large-scale rotation. More or less the opposite of traditional grazing techniques, the benefits are immense. Confining cattle into a small space for a small amount of time means 100% of the

ground benefits from "hoof action," which tills the soil, stirring latent seed beds from native grasses that haven't been seen in generations.

The cows' natural fertilizer and saliva builds soil health through micronutrients and fungi. In return, the diverse and nutrient-rich food source of the resulting native grassland breeds healthier, happier cattle as well as native birds and wildlife.

"Not only will these practices add to our bottom line, there's no better way of building soil than animals, wild or domesticated, and cattle are easy to move", said Loy.

As someone who's ingrained in the agricultural community in Texas, Loy was surprised by how little information is available. "We are one of only a few ranches doing this in our area," he said. "I credit Audubon Texas for the knowledge we've acquired very rapidly."

There are larger-scale impacts, too. As soil health improves, its ability to absorb and process water and nutrients increases, reducing unhealthy bacterial loads in streams and estuaries that feed nearby Matagorda Bay (home to Sundown Island, one of the Texas Gulf Coast's most productive colonial waterbird rookeries). Improved water quality is critical to the health of our forage and commercial fisheries. Can you imagine a Texas where every ranch is a conservation easement for wildlife, as well as a home to healthier cattle, which provide a more sustainable food source for us while transforming entire ecosystems for the better?



PRAIRIE & GRASSLAND CONSERVATION