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Red Ranch: Stewards of the Land

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Stewards of the Land
Ruth Loveland

Pigments made with soil from Cottonwood Falls, Kansas

RED RANCH

STEWARDS OF THE LAND

Less than four percent.

That's all that remains of the nearly 170 million acres of tallgrass prairie that once covered the North American heartland. The tallgrass prairie is one of the most altered ecological communities on the continent.

However, we are fortunate here in eastern Kansas and Oklahoma to be blessed with the Flint Hills, the largest expanse of tallgrass prairie remaining on the planet. More contiguous acres of tallgrass prairie remain in Kansas than in all the other prairie states and provinces combined. The Flint Hills are our last hope to conserve and protect the tallgrass prairie at an ecologically significant scale.

More than 98%. That's how much land in Kansas is privately owned. Our state ranks second in the nation for its percentage of acres under private ownership. In order to preserve the Flint Hills, the last tallgrass prairie stronghold, good land stewardship is needed and rests on the shoulders of the ranchers and private landowners who call the Flint Hills home.

For generations, ranchers have managed the rolling grasslands of the Flint Hills to provide high-quality forage for their livestock while preserving the breathtaking vistas and open views. The ranching community recognizes the value the prairie provides to their families' futures, to the local economy and to the unique cowboy culture of the region. Sound management decisions to conserve the largest remaining stand of the tallgrass prairie ecosystem are the hallmark of generations of responsible Flint Hills ranchers who lead the nation in grazing management as well as prescribed fire. These two critical forces continue to shape the

historic tallgrass prairie in ways that both conserve biological diversity and are economically viable.

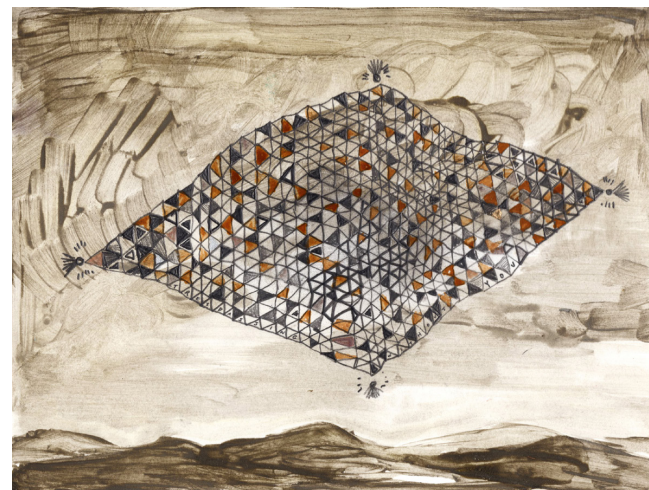
A conservationist, or land steward, is one who advocates or acts for the protection of an environment or ecosystem. The terms are often used interchangeably in the conservation arena, but no matter which term we choose, ranchers are truly conservationists and stewards of the land. In order for conservation activities to be successful, beneficial management practices must be adopted and implemented by the rancher. Here in the unique Flint Hills ecosystem, we are fortunate to have abundant assistance available at state, federal and non-governmental organization levels. These vital resources advocate for the protection of the Flint Hills and partner to provide technical guidance and financial assistance to the ranchers, who ultimately are the ones to take action.

The Red Ranch is a prime example of a partnership between ranchers and state, federal and non-governmental organizations. The ranch has a solid history of good land stewardship, supported by partners like The Nature Conservancy and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Working together, the Red Ranch land stewardship efforts expanded to become a larger conservation partnership. Numerous organizations have come together on the Red Ranch to ensure tallgrass prairie conservation. They include

The Nature Conservancy's Conservation Easement Stewardship Initiative, the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program, the Tallgrass Legacy Alliance, the USFWS Partners for Fish & Wildlife Program, the Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition and the KDWP Habitat First Program. Actively working with the Red Ranch and its neighbors, these resource partners provide guidance to help improve the ecological functions of the prairie while supporting viable cattle operations.

The priorities are to promote and help implement conservation activities that improve water quality, increase wildlife populations and improve overall ecosystem health — all in ways that keep family ranching economically viable. Practices implemented on the Red Ranch and neighboring land include clearing trees, spot-spraying invasive plant species, implementing a varied fire regime and maintaining proper stocking rates. While all partners involved share a common mission to improve and protect the tallgrass prairie ecosystem, each is unique in its individual role and delivery of conservation benefits. Every member of this conservation partnership brings value to the table and realizes that working together with a common purpose will result in far more successful outcomes than going it alone.

The conservation message to the Red Ranch from all partners has been



Magic Carpet
Ruth Loveland

consistent since the beginning. It is this very consistency that has been key to building a trusting relationship that provides valuable conservation benefits to this unique landscape. It is the ranchers who are the true heroes in this conservation partnership, as they recognize and accept that just a few slight changes in ranch management could result in tremendous benefits to the ecological well-being of the tallgrass prairie.

The Evans family, owners of the Red Ranch in Greenwood County, Kansas, are hosts for the 2024 Symphony in the Flint Hills Signature Event. This ranching family's commitment to conservation — stewardship of the land — is aided by their partnership with Vogel Horse and Cattle and the technical guidance provided by The Nature Conservancy, Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and Kansas Department of Wildlife & Parks.

A collective story authored by prairie stewards Vickie Cikanek, Anthony Capizzo, Greg Kramos, Paula Matile, Abbey Vogel, Adrian Vogel and Luke Westerman.