

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



Monona Co. Farmer Saving Grassland from Tree Invasion

When Gary Hargroves purchased his first of two farms in the Loess Hills more than ten years ago, you couldn't see the hills through the trees. Instead of a mixture of native warm-season grasses and wildflowers that support cattle grazing and wildlife, a nearly impenetrable mass of Eastern red cedar trees covered his land.



NRCS District Conservationist Kathy Schneider (kneeling front) and Gary Hargroves (front left) with the burning coop group in Monona County.

"You couldn't even walk along these ridge tops five years ago," Hargroves said, driving along in his Gator. "Now, you can barely tell that there were ever trees here. The prairie came back so quickly."

This was accomplished with the assistance of the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) through the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the LHA Stewardship Initiative, a habitat restoration cost-share program through the Loess Hills Alliance. About 130 of his 402 total acres are enrolled in habitat improvement programs.

Hargroves cleared many of the cedars by hand and using local commercial tree shearers. But he also uses prescribed fire extensively to keep the brush from reclaiming the grass. "We like to burn the prairie every two years. It

helps that my son John is a member of the local volunteer fire department," Hargroves said.

The Hargroves neighborhood has a cooperative burning unit consisting of several landowners who also implement prescribed burning. The cooperative makes sure every landowner has enough help to conduct a safe burn. Neighbor Gene Melby assists by checking weather conditions, planning firebreaks and implementing the burn. He says, "We decide what we are going to do and we know how to work together to make it happen". Gary credits the co-op unit for his burning success.

Although Eastern red cedars are native to Iowa, their numbers in the Loess Hills have increased dramatically in the past 50 years, rapidly replacing open grassland with forest. "This isn't natural succession," said Hargroves, "but rather a direct result of man's intervention by suppressing fire."

Removal of red cedar trees makes room for plants, like this Pasque Flower.



CONSERVATION *Showcase*



After cedar tree removal, strong natural revegetation by native prairie species is common in the Loess Hills. On Hargroves' farms, the prairie is dominated by warm-season grasses such as side oats grama, Indiangrass, and big bluestem. Native legumes such as purple prairie clover, locoweed, and prairie turnip are abundant in the nitrogen-poor loess soils. Now that native prairie has returned to the landscape, so has the wildlife. Deer and turkey are more common, and songbirds can be heard all over the farm.

Louis Reed and his son, Louis Paul Reed, manage the cropland and pasture on Gary's farm. They have implemented a conserving rotation with row crop and alfalfa, along with no-tilling all crops, including into the alfalfa. In addition, Hargroves has restored older terraces with the Little Sioux PL-534 cost-share program and uses a variety of soil management activities to minimize soil loss even with strong rains. Together, the Reeds and Gary have figured out how to effectively utilize the fragile Loess Hills without overgrazing.

"The combination of farming the cropland to a sustainable level, good pasture management, and implementation of prairie restoration makes Gary's farms a showcase example of total resource management," says District Conservationist Kathy Schneider with the NRCS in Onawa. "Prairie restoration can be a huge time and financial commitment, but Gary is determined to take care of his land for future generations."

In order to ensure the continued protection of his lands, Hargroves has expressed interest in participating in the NRCS Grassland Reserve Program or the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program.

Even though the restoration process has been difficult, Hargroves is pleased with the results. "What I have found over the past several years is that progressive conservation practices, while at first may seem like a liability, soon return good dividends for all."

-30-

For more information, contact Kathy Schneider at kathy.schneider@ia.usda.gov.

*by Andrea Blong,
Wildlife Habitat Specialist
October 2009*



NRCS District Conservationist Kathy Schneider discusses a conservation plan with Gary Hargroves at his Loess Hills farm.