

CONSERVATION *Showcase*

Conservation program helps preserve prairie, family ranching traditions

Standing among the native camas in a sea of green sprinkled with yellow, blue, and lavender flowers, Fred Colvin imagines that little has changed since 1865. And now, thanks to the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP), little will.

GRP and a grazing plan developed by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), provided the Colvin family the ability to ensure that their native prairie will remain a viable, productive and important ecosystem for generations to come.

"Right now the prairie is as pretty as it can be," Mr. Colvin says, becoming the first Washington landowner to sign his land into easement with the GRP program.

The Colvin Ranch is a Century Farm, homesteaded by Ignatius Colvin, Fred Colvin's grandfather. He settled in the Tenino, Washington area, on approximately 3,000 acres of South Puget Sound native prairies. The Colvin family decided to offer

216 acres, a portion of their remaining 600 acres, for enrollment as a permanent easement into the GRP program.

"GRP is a voluntary program offering landowners the opportunity to protect, restore and enhance various forms of grassland, rangeland, pastures and shrublands," says Gus Hughbanks, NRCS



Fred Colvin (left) and NRCS State Conservationist, Gus Hughbanks, look across a sea of blue camas and yellow buttercup flowers at the Colvin Ranch near Tenino. Thanks to the Grassland Reserve Program, the Colvin Ranch will remain as a "working ranch" for future generations.

State Conservationist for Washington. "GRP emphasis is on enrolling existing high quality native grasslands with the greatest biodiversity and the greatest threat of conversion to other uses such as industrial or residential development. The program conserves vulnerable prairies while maintaining viable ranching operations," Mr. Hughbanks says.

“GRP is an opportunity to keep the ranch together for future generations.”

Fred Colvin

“This program recognizes the importance of private ownership and working lands,” Mr. Colvin says, who has 100 cattle on the ranch as well as another 120 yearlings for part of the year.

Those cattle play a vital role in controlling the non-native grasses that, if left unchecked, would take over the native plants on the prairie, according to Marty Chaney, an agronomist with the NRCS. “In a historic prairie ecosystem, fire was a key element in maintaining the balance of prairie plants,” she says.



Using cattle as a conservation tool, the Colvins protect native vegetation.

“Cows actually prefer to eat grasses rather than flowers and prefer the softer, non-native grasses to those of the native variety,” Ms. Chaney says.

To control where the cattle graze, Mr. Colvin has divided up the prairie into smaller fields set apart with fencing. He worked with NRCS to develop a grazing plan, which helps utilize the prairie for his cattle while promoting native plant growth and vitality. Careful monitoring of prairie health along with rotational grazing are the keys to the success of preserving the prairie.

“But that is not an option for many parts of Washington where controlled burns are not allowed,” Ms. Chaney says. “Herbicides and mowing are an alternative but are not as effective,” she says.

According to Ms. Chaney, prairie restoration and maintenance costs are quite substantial and current mechanical and chemical maintenance requires constant and untiring effort.

So the job of maintaining the prairie falls to the cattle.

“These cows are a conservation tool,” Mr. Colvin says. “That’s a shift in thought to what we previously considered.”

By allowing the cattle to graze parts of the prairie at certain times of the year, the cows eat the non-native grasses without disturbing the prairie plants.



Blooming blue camas and yellow buttercup flowers color the Colvin’s field of dreams.

“It’s not really that much different from what we have always done,” Mr. Colvin says. “It’s basically matching the presence of cattle with the seasons of the year. Right now the grasses are all in bloom and making their seed so we wouldn’t want cattle in there now,” he says.

Mr. Colvin said he saw the urgency of protecting the land about three years ago when a housing development was proposed across the highway. “We were concerned about what was going on around us,” Mr. Colvin says. “GRP is an opportunity to keep the ranch together for future generations.”

The Colvin Ranch family can look forward to another century of farming and tradition.

*Kelly Sprute, NRCS Washington
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