



Cody, Treg and Hudson Hatcher ride across the prairie in Syracuse, KS. © Morgan Heim

Harvesting Hope

Severe drought threatened their ranch, the Farm Bill helped turn it all around

Treg Hatcher's three-by-five-mile ranch in southwestern Kansas means everything to him. It is where he works. It is where he goes to find peace. It is the gathering place for his family—including three sons he raised there and five grandchildren who now play there. It is the place that holds so many memories from his childhood. And it is nirvana for his four dogs.

"All I've ever wanted is to be on this ranch and for the ranch to be part of my kids' lives," says Hatcher, 59, as he looks over the expansive landscape.

So this cowboy was devastated when Mother Nature turned against him 15 years ago. First, she held back the rain for a few years. The land was so dry that the grasses died off, which was devastating to the hundreds of grass-fed cattle he

owned, as well as the wildlife that thrives in grassland habitat. The powerful winds that western Kansas is known for picked up the dry soil and whipped it into the air, making it hard to breathe. The wind also blew soil and dead grasses into mounds along the fence line that became so high the cattle could walk up them to escape the pasture.

The scene was reminiscent of the Dust Bowl that devastated Kansas and surrounding states in the 1930s. It was hard to imagine that bison once roamed the region, grazing on millions of acres of healthy grasses and other prairie plants.

"All I was growing back then was dirt," Hatcher recalls.

A local friend had the answer for him: Talk to Ted Houser about what could

be done on the ranch to turn things around. Houser was an employee of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), an agency of the United States Department of Agriculture. NRCS is one of the entities that run programs supported by the Farm Bill, the largest source of federal funding for conservation, restoration and management of privately owned land. The agency provides technical and financial support to farmers, ranchers and foresters who want to be better stewards of the land. Although skeptical at first about getting help from the government—something his family had never done—Hatcher was intrigued. He wanted to do whatever he could to hold onto his land.

Houser felt Hatcher's best option was NRCS's Environmental Quality



Rotational grazing has helped the Hatchers maintain a healthier grassland ecosystem even when water is scarce. Here yucca plants sprout from the prairie landscape. Photos © Morgan Heim

Incentives Program (EQIP), which focused on helping landowners incorporate environmentally friendly practices into their operations. Houser was particularly keen on this program because Hatcher’s ranch is in a priority area for the lesser prairie-chicken, a threatened species.

Hatcher enrolled in the EQIP program. He used funding from the program, coupled with his own dollars, to start doing more rotational grazing, which involves moving a herd of cattle to a new fenced-in area (called a paddock) of the ranch once every 30 days or so. Moving the herd gives the prairie plants in the just-grazed paddock an opportunity to fully grow back before that land is grazed again. Hatcher had been doing some rotational grazing on prior to EQIP but only had the infrastructure to create a few paddocks. That meant the cattle were only moved a few times a year—not nearly enough time for the plant roots to take hold and grow back better. With EQIP, Hatcher was able to double the number of his paddocks. He could have added more cattle to his operation, but that would have defeated the purpose of creating a healthy pasture.

“The EQIP program was life-changing,” says Hatcher, adding that the skies opening and finally providing some rain was also a relief. “I felt hopeful again. It helped me get out of a bad situation.”

Hatcher was so pleased with the outcome of EQIP that he applied for another Farm Bill program, the Grassland Conservation Reserve (GRP) Program. GRP pays farmers and ranchers to set aside their environmentally sensitive land for conservation benefits. They can graze the land, but it has to be done in accordance with a prescribed grazing plan. Hatcher has enrolled 1,000 acres in the GRP program.

It has been 10 years since Hatcher thought he was going to have to sell his family ranch. But now the ranch is so healthy that he can run 400 beef cattle. And there are other signs of life on the ranch again—mule deer, antelope, lesser prairie-chicken, hawks, sunflowers and milkweed, to name a few.

“The grass has never been as tall as it is now,” Hatcher says. “It’s so awesome to hear the wind blowing through it when I walk through the fields.”

NATURE KANSAS

What You Need to Know About the Farm Bill

The Farm Bill provides voluntary, incentive-based programs that help farmers, ranchers and other landowners address climate change while conserving their land and way of life. It’s the single largest source of U.S. federal funding for conserving, restoring and managing private land, including grasslands, forests, ranchlands and croplands.

The Farm Bill provides \$6 billion annually for conservation. From incentivizing climate-smart agricultural practices to opening doors for permanent conservation through agricultural conservation easements, this critical bipartisan legislation benefits every single state in the country. More than 70% of the land in the lower 48 states is privately owned, making it eligible for Farm Bill programs that help spur healthier soils, cleaner water, carbon sequestration and wildlife habitat conservation. The Farm Bill remains one of the country’s most successful and important conservation programs.

Watch a video to hear from the Hatchers and learn more at nature.org/farmbill.

Ready to Act?

Scan the code to tell Congress to support conservation programs in the Farm Bill.

