

## NRCS Program Helps Improve Ranchland

By: Joanna Pope, Nebraska NRCS Public Affairs Officer

When most people think about protecting the environment they probably don't think about cutting down thousands of trees. But cutting down thousands of cedar trees was exactly what Gary Bruns' rangeland needed to help restore his mixed grass prairie in southern Lincoln County.

Over the years Bruns' rangeland had become heavily infested with eastern red cedar trees. The trees had become so thick that his grazing land acres had been greatly reduced. Before long the cedar tree problem was out of control.

Bruns sought help with his cedar tree problem from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). After discussing his options with NRCS, Bruns enrolled his grassland into the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

EQIP is a voluntary conservation program offered from NRCS. It provides landowners technical and financial assistance with natural resources management on their property. EQIP is a good fit for

Bruns since it provides landowners with assistance to manage invasive species, like the eastern red cedar.

Several of Nebraska's rangeland acres have been invaded by eastern red cedar. This hardy tree, which has been used for decades in windbreaks and wildlife habitat plantings, can become a problem when it is left unchecked. It can spread across an area and convert prairie into a dense forest.

This dramatic change in landscape has put several species of grassland dependent wildlife at risk. Species that are declining due to the loss of their prairie habitat include the Northern Bobwhite-quail, elk, Greater Prairie-chicken and the American burying beetle, which is on the endangered species list.

The cedar tree invasion has also meant the loss of grazing land acres and potential income for Nebraska ranchers. According to the NRCS the Loess Canyons area of southern Lincoln County is losing 2% of its grazing land acres each year to cedar tree encroachment.



Photos by: Jeff Nichols, NRCS

*The photo on the left shows Gary Bruns' pasture land before the cedar tree removal. The photo on the right shows what this same area looks like after receiving assistance from NRCS to restore of his grazing land through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program in partnership with the Nebraska Natural Legacy Program.*

More and more of Nebraska's prairies are suffering from cedar encroachment, according to Jeff Nichols, NRCS resource conservationist in North Platte.

"If landowners aren't diligent in managing cedar tree growth, they can quickly lose their ability to graze those acres due to the trees becoming so thick," Nichols said.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service is cooperating with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission to work with landowners to help remove cedar trees through the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project. The Nebraska Natural Legacy Project (NNLP) is a special initiative available in designated areas across the state designed to address the specific needs and opportunities within biologically unique landscapes.

EQIP and NNLP are being utilized together in Lincoln County to help restore the Loess Canyons area. The Loess Canyons have been identified as a biologically unique landscape making the NNLP funding available to landowners in this region.

EQIP coupled with NNLP can provide qualified landowners with the cost to remove cedar trees. The trees are sheared off at the base, and then stacked in large piles. To help keep the trees from becoming a problem again, NRCS designs a grazing management plan and recommends landowners conduct a prescribed burn every three to five years after the initial tree cutting has occurred. A prescribed maintenance burn will be required periodically thereafter to maintain the grassland ecosystem.

According to Nichols, fire is one of the most effective methods in controlling cedar trees. But since fire has been removed from the landscape out of fear of causing property damage, the cedar problem has exploded. NRCS, as well as other private organizations like Quail Forever and the Loess Canyons Rangeland Alliance, is working with landowners to help increase the use of prescribed burns.

"A prescribed burn is a highly controlled fire. It isn't anything like a wildfire. It's only conducted under very specific conditions after a lot of planning. Once a landowner experiences a prescribed burn and

understands how controlled it is, the practice becomes much less intimidating," Nichols said.

Historically, prairies evolved with disturbances like grazing from bison and antelope, and from wildfires. These disturbances worked together to help keep the prairie system healthy. The hoof action of the grazing animals trampled dead organic matter into the soil. Their grazing helped stimulate new plant growth, and fire helped control excessive woody vegetation.

NRCS conservationists now design rangeland management plans that mimic the prairie environment's natural disturbance patterns. Through prescribed burning and rotational grazing, ranchers can manage their grassland in a way that encourages the health of the grasses and keeps woody species, like cedar trees, controlled.

Nichols worked with Bruns to develop a grazing land management plan. Bruns said he learned a lot from the planning process.

"Jeff really knows what he's talking about regarding pasture management practices. A lot of what he recommends is just good common sense, but I really appreciated his approach to the problem. He helped me see that it all comes down to proper management," Bruns said.

Nichols stresses that once the cedars are cleared from the rangeland, it is imperative that landowners stay on top of controlling the trees regrowth.

"For every tree you cut down, there are 100 little trees ready to spring up in its place. The key is to not let those trees grow too large and become unmanageable. The most economical way to keep tree growth down is by prescribed burns," Nichols said.

Bruns utilized EQIP on a portion of his property and is also enrolled in a five-year NNLP contract. His contract paid to have the cedar trees cut from his property. He is now responsible for following a grazing management plan, and burning the large piles of cut cedar trees. According to Bruns, his grassland is much more manageable now, and he's dedicated to keeping it healthy.

"If I hadn't received the financial and technical

assistance from NRCS and Game and Parks I'd probably still be procrastinating. But I've already seen big benefits from removing the trees. More grass is coming back from where the trees had been. I'm really committed to keeping my grassland well managed," Bruns said.

For more information about EQIP and other conservation programs available from NRCS visit [www.ne.nrcs.usda.gov/programs](http://www.ne.nrcs.usda.gov/programs), or your local USDA Service Center. ♦

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