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Natural Resources Conservation Service

Helping People Help The Land
January/February 2012 Issue No. 13

The Reverchon Naturalist

Recognizing the work of French botanist Julien Reverchon, who began collecting throughout the North-Central Texas area in 1876, and all the botanists/naturalists who have followed ...

Wildfires of 2011—Lessons We Can Learn

Story by Steve Nelle
Retired NRCS Wildlife Biologist
San Angelo, Texas

2011 was a year that many Texas landowners would like to forget. Yet it has been a year that will long be remembered and etched into our memories. It will go down in the books as both the worst wildfire year, and the worst single drought year in the state's history. These two forces of nature ganged up for a horrendous synergistic effect on the land, plants, animals, and people.

Statistics and records cannot adequately capture nor communicate the true impacts of these wildfires. For the rancher or landowner who lost all or part of their ranch to wildfire, and then to experience week after continuous week of unrelenting heat and no rain, the biological, financial and emotional impacts were overwhelming. Ranchers tend to be a stoic group of people, especially the multi-generational families who have seen hardship before. They may not outwardly show their pain and anguish; they may not complain or talk about it, but inside it hurts. This pain comes from their connection to the land. In an almost literal sense, the land is part of the person and the person is a part of the land. When one is injured, the other is affected. For city and town people and those who do not own or directly manage land, this connection is not as close, the impacts not as personal and the pain not as painful.

One of the marks of successful people is that they learn from life's experiences. 2011 was a year to learn from. One of the things we have learned from the unprecedented wildfires is that the experts do not always have the right answers. We often rely on professionals and experts to help guide us in the right direction, and the best way of thinking. The advice of the experts is usually worthwhile and helpful. But in a year like 2011, there were no experts. No living person had ever seen these conditions coincide and collide the way they did in 2011; so it is no wonder that experts were at a loss. Perhaps they should have remained silent. The statements below were made by some of the leading fire experts in Texas during the 2011 wildfire season, followed by lessons we can learn.

"Fire is a natural part of the ecology of Texas; therefore, the effects of fire should be viewed as good and beneficial." Everyone agrees that fire is natural and has an important place in the ecological big picture. However, wolves, screw worms, brucellosis, anthrax, ice storms, drought, and tornados are also natural. We don't consider them beneficial and we don't welcome them as desirable. The lesson: **Long term ecological impacts and dynamics should not be detached or isolated from real human and economic impacts.**

In 2011, there was heavy wildfire damage throughout north-central Texas, including this area in Palo Pinto County . (Photo Credit: Ricky Linex, USDA-NRCS)

(Continued on page 8)

By Ricky Linex
NRCS Wildlife Biologist
Weatherford, Texas

Are We Entering the Pay Me Now, or Pay Me Later Stage?

In this issue of The Reverchon Naturalist is an article from the October 1960 issue of the Cattleman magazine. I would like to call your attention to the message of the article and the messenger. First, let me describe the messenger, his name was Clarence A. Rechenthin and he worked for the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) from 1935-1976. He was undoubtedly a unique individual, and first came on-board as a soil scientist at the beginning of the SCS. He rose to the level of soil survey supervisor for West Texas through 1944. He then became a soil conservationist at the regional office in Fort Worth for 10 years. During this time, he also served as zone conservationist for West Texas. He transferred to San Angelo as area range conservationist in 1954, and arrived at the state office in 1957. His final role was as state resource conservationist, which he held until he retired. The article is located within Conservation Time Passages on page six of this issue.

Residing in most NRCS field offices is an old copy of his plant book, *Native Flowers of Texas,* printed by the SCS in 1972. Another unique aspect of this man is that each of the line drawings of the plants in this book was drawn by Clarence Rechenthin**.** If you look at some of the photos of Texas plants on the PLANTS database website, you will often see the photographer was C.A. Rechenthin. Some of his 35mm slides have been scanned and submitted to the database. Clarence Rechenthin passed away in 1995, prior to widespread availability of computers, Internet and the vast resources available through this modern resource. Clarence worked during the time when experience and knowledge was learned in the field, walking and observing the landscape, and learning to read the land.

Now let's go to the message in the article, "How Much of it SOAKS IN?" Although many landowners have reduced herd numbers in 2011, there are those who are feebly attempting to hold on to a core herd with the promise of those cattle being worth their weight in gold when the land begins to recover. Another way to look at this situation is to ask: what is the worth of the land and vegetation itself. Are landowners harming land and forage worth many thousands of dollars just to hold onto a cow that might, for a short period of time, be worth up to $2,000 per head. The price of the cow at this time is just speculation, but the price of land is a real number. You can easily and quickly replace the cow, but how long will it take to recover the land? The price for meat will certainly go up for a while until cattle numbers rebound, but how long will it take for the health of the land to rebound?

"Take care of the land, and the land will take care of you." — This quote by Hugh Hammond Bennett remains as relevant today as when he spoke it more than 50 years ago. Bennett was the first chief of the Soil Conservation Service.

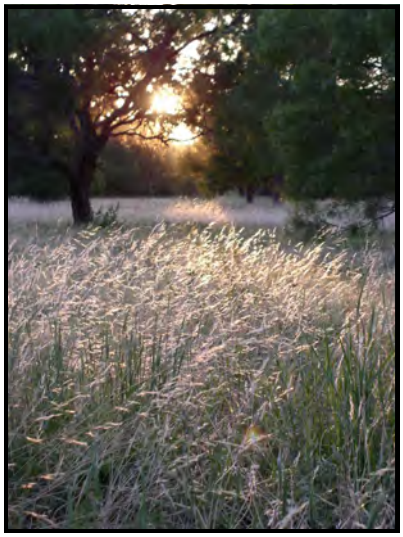
Texas Wintergrass (*Nassella leucotricha*)

Story by Znobia Wootan
Native American Seed Company
Junction, Texas

Some of us can remember the spear grass fights of our youth. Whether it was with friends, neighborhood kids, or cousins the first swimming trip of the summer usually began or ended with a spear grass battle. The seed heads from Texas Wintergrass, *Nassella leucotricha,* ripen at the beginning of summer providing an ample supply of spears. It has an oat-like seed with a 2-4 inch twisted awn to use as ammunition for a brief running skirmish. The resemblance to a spear is really uncanny. Most of the time when I reflect on a marvel of nature, I usually don't have an answer but the secret of the barbed seed and twisted awn has been revealed by careful observation. The twisted awn is an evolutionary tool responding to the humidity in the air. The awn twists and untwists with the changing humidity gently driving the seed into the ground. The barbed tip of the seed catches in the coats and artificial coats (socks and clothing) of any and all passing animals insuring a wider dispersal. This particular feature has earned Texas Wintergrass an ugly reputation with the sheep and goat raisers throughout the state. The seed would lower the quality of the wool or Mohair, and before the eradication of the screw worm any sore caused by the seed burrowing into the coat would become packed with screw worms.

On the other hand, Texas Wintergrass is the most wide spread prolific cool season grass available for grazing, providing valuable forage in lean months. The grass grows best in the deeper soils of pecan bottoms or mesquite flats. Even though it is found in dense stands in shady pecan bottoms, Texas Wintergrass has a medium tolerance for shade. It is a cool season grass, so during most of its active growing cycle the leaves of the pecan trees have not flushed out yet. By the time the pecans are fully leafed out our hot Texas summer is beginning in earnest and the Texas Wintergrass has finished with its seasonal growth. It will stay green all summer under the trees as long as it does not get too dry or too hot, in which it will turn brown and go dormant. Texas Wintergrass is found growing from Northern Mexico up into Northern Oklahoma. Add some diversity to your environment for the wildlife and for you. Plant some Texas Wintergrass this fall, and in the spring ambush some unsuspecting youngsters and squeals of laughter will fill the early summer air. *(Photos courtesy of Native American Seed Company)*

Lush, green growth of Texas Wintergrass, left photo, during the cool season provides valuable forage in the winter months. Dry, wispy stems after the seeds have fallen off, right photo, and underneath it's actually ever green.



Why Are The Mesquite Leaves Not Falling?

Story by Bruce Kreitler
Abilene, Texas

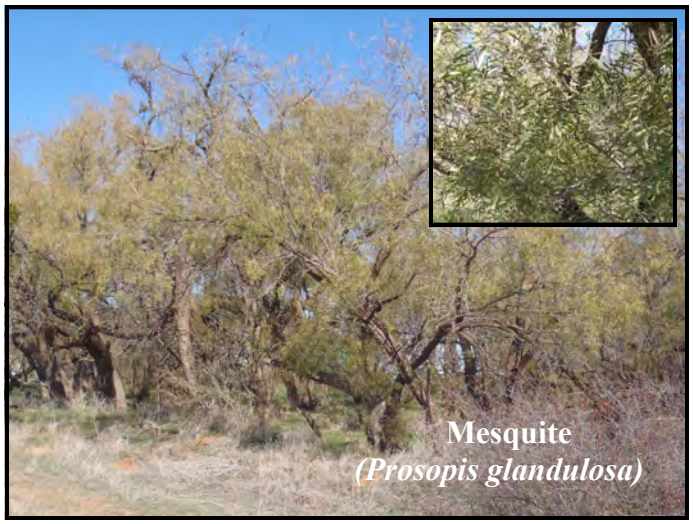
Anyone that has spent a little time in West Texas lately will have noticed that mesquite trees have been behaving very strangely. While as a tree person, I have noticed some odd things concerning mesquites this year, the latest thing they have done, and a lot of people noticed this is to hold their leaves into December.

For the most part, trees that drop their leaves (deciduous) on a regular schedule do it because the winter time is a dryer time of year with less daylight. There is a lot of research and literature on and about the mechanics of this, and it's (to me) some pretty interesting reading. But to avoid readers going into a coma, we'll skip the scientific papers.

Most of the deciduous trees drop their foliage because they basically are not water thrifty enough to be able to depend on getting through the dry short days of winter without losing more water through their leaves than they can replace. For our area, think of ash trees, mulberries, sycamores, and the oak trees that aren't live oaks. If you were to examine the foliage on these trees you will notice that it is fairly soft, and has no wax like coating. If on the other hand, you were to look at a live oak, magnolia, pine, or cedar, you will see that they have very tough waxy leaves, scales, or needles. This means these plants have developed a better ability to control the amount of moisture they transpire. Being able to regulate the water they lose means they are can go through the dry winter, and take advantage of moisture when it's available and when it's not, they just bide their time.

Just one more point about how deciduous trees normally operate. Most of them drop their leaves by activating a hormone called abscisic acid. As with nearly everything that trees produce, this particular hormone has other functions, but the one most visible to us is leaf drop. Some trees, such as red oaks can be a little indefinite about exactly when the leaves are booted off the tree, but most deciduous species drop their leaves in a short period of time and this is because the abscisic acid pretty much cuts them loose all at once.

Okay, if deciduous trees drop their foliage every year because they just can't quite keep up with their evergreen cousins, what about the trees that are good at handling water but still defoliate for the winter? In our area, there are two species I know to be pretty good at finding and retaining water, but still shed their leaves (or what passes for leaves) in the winter. Those two species are bald cypress and mesquite.


Mesquite
(Prosopis glandulosa)

Bald cypress trees are a pretty unique species with some fairly strange features. One of the very few trees that can handle excessive moisture (to the point of growing in standing water), it also is the only tree with needles I'm aware of which is truly deciduous. Again, there is a lot of good literature out there about this particular species both because they are so unique, and on top of that they are a desirable tree. If you are selling a house and it has one of these beauties in the yard, that's a good selling point.

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(Continued from page 4—Why Are The Mesquite Leaves Not Falling?)

Mesquite trees are also a pretty unique plant, but while desirable trees with monetary value such as bald cypress get lots of study, plants which are mostly classed as an undesirable invasive weed-like mesquite, don't get much attention. Most of the literature and study on mesquites is centered on how to get rid of them. As a consequence of this, a lot less is known about this tree than most people would realize. I know it's natural to assume that nearly anything anybody could possibly want to know is being studied in great detail somewhere, but the reality is there are a lot more questions than there are research dollars (or people) to answer them. If you think about it this should not take you long to realize that a lot of things take precedence over finding out how to keep mesquite trees happy.

So after all of that, why did mesquites hold their leaves all the way into December? The short answer is that I have some theories about it, but I don't know for sure. The longer answer would be to lay some of those theories, wild as they may be, out for you.

First, I want to say that I'm going to assume this odd behavior is a result of our extreme summer this last year. Since we have had some pretty cold weather from time to time in the years that I've been observing mesquites, I feel that if last winter's cold snap could have caused them to hold their leaves so late, we would have seen it happen before.

One thing that comes to mind is that the mechanism, which causes the trees to manufacture and distribute the abscisic acid, may have been interrupted by either the lack of moisture or extreme heat during the drought. Since the dryness and the heat were both longer and worse than we ever have seen before, either one of them, or both in combination may have simply caused the plants to be unable to function normally. If this is the case, then the leaves will have continued operating until they just basically dried and fell off. Since the whole goal of being deciduous is to keep the leaves from doing just that, if this is the case, it will adversely affect the trees.

Another thought is that since there was a decided lack of moisture and a notable surplus of heat (trees don't do much in the way of photosynthesis or growing when the ambient temperature is over 95 degrees), maybe mesquites retained the leaves longer to try and take advantage of cooler weather. In fact, it would make perfect sense for this to happen, except for the one little minor detail that trees are not sentient and don't manage themselves. In order for the leaves to stay on beyond the normal time of year for the sole purpose of utilizing a few weeks of extra sunlight, there would have to be some kind of biological mechanism in place to trigger it.

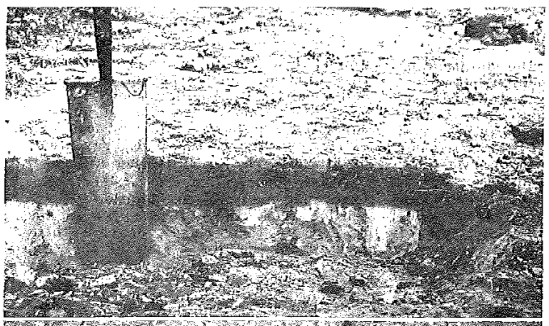
What makes me very curious about whether or not mesquites have some kind of biological combination that causes them to hold foliage, and try to get that last little bit of photosynthesis done is how could they develop that capacity? In order for a tree, or anything else to evolve some kind of process that is a favorable survival trait, the conditions that trait can overcome have to be common enough to create a real need for it. Since we apparently only have summers like this last one every few centuries, which span covers several generations of mesquites, how would they develop a physical capability that allows them to respond to events that are so separated by time?

While I've raised more questions and answered none here, I will say that watching the mesquites in this coming year may give us some better information. If we lose a very large numbers of trees, particularly in the ones that held leaves the latest, then we can reason that holding the leaves longer was something they couldn't prevent. If on the other hand, and I suspect this may be the case, the mesquites recover quite well from this drought, then we are going to have to look a lot harder for good answers. (*Photo courtesy of Charles Schur, USDA-NRCS)*

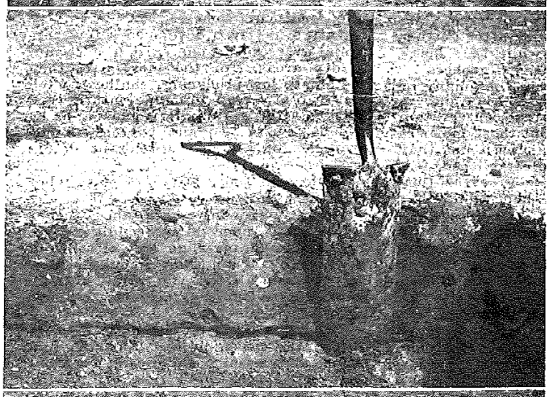
Bruce Kreitler is the owner of Broken Willow Tree Service in Abilene, Texas, and an ISA Certified Arborist, Board Certified Master Arborist, Certified Texas Master Naturalist, Municipal Specialist, Utility Specialist, and published author.

Conservation Time Passages

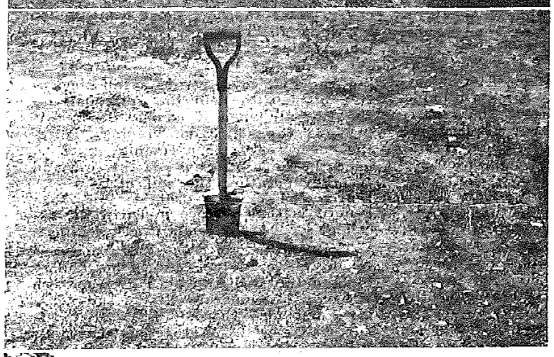
As referenced previously in this January/February issue, attached is an article written for The Cattleman magazine, October 1960 edition, about how much water soaks in after it rains. Clarence Rechenthin worked for the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) from 1935-1976, advancing from a soil scientist to state resource conservationist in Texas. We hope you enjoy reading the article, for it is every bit as pertinent today as it was when originally printed more than 50 years ago and spans Mr. Rechenthin's career with the SCS.



1. *A 2.25-inch rain wet this bare soil three inches deep, which means that only one-half inch soaked in. The rest ran off. A few weeds germinated, but four days later you couldn't tell that it had rained.*



2. *A 5.5-inch rain wet this bare soil only 10 inches deep, indicating that only two inches of moisture soaked in. The other 3.5 inches wasted off the thirsty land, taking soil with it, washing out fences and flooding lowlands.*



3. *You don't have to go to the desert to see a desert. The same range as in No. 2. This picture was taken four months later. A few annual weeds had grown and produced seed. Moisture was all gone, lost to weeds and evaporation. The ground was still bare.*

4. *This picture, photographed near where pictures 2 and 3 were taken. On this range, good cover existed. Most of the rain soaked into the soil and grew grass. There isn't much water wasted off a range like this.*

How Much of It SOAKS IN?

By C. A. RECHENTHIN, *Soil Conservation Service*

IT'S NOT HOW MUCH rain you get that counts, but what you do with it that is important. It's the water that goes deep into your soil below the evaporation level that grows forage for your livestock.

Rainfall is just about the most important natural resource a rancher has. But even with 15 to 20 inches average rainfall, a rancher can have desert conditions, just as surely as if he lived in the Mojave Desert.

"Impossible!" you say.

If you think so, just go look at Texas rangelands. On some, you'll see bare ground, annual weeds, and shallow-rooted, low-producing grasses—every one a sure indicator of low rainfall, high soil temperatures, high evaporation, and other conditions characteristic of a desert!

Ranching in a desert doesn't sound inviting nor profitable. Yet some ranchers are doing just that!

How can this be? Easy. Just take a look at what is happening to the rainfall on these ranges.

Average Showers Small

Rainfall records in West Texas show that about one-third of the average annual rainfall comes as small showers. In drouth years when moisture is so very important, the percentage of small ineffective showers is even higher. These showers consist of traces to 0.4 inch of moisture, which is lost by evaporation so quickly that grasses can't even green up.

This means that with an average of 15 inches annually, there are only 10 inches to grow grass; with 21 inches annually, there are 14 inches for grass.

Ten to 14 inches annually is plenty of moisture to grow lots of grass, provided effective use is made of it.

With 10 to 14 inches, about 2.25 to 3.1 million pounds of water fall on each acre. Scientists have found that it takes about 500 pounds of water to grow a pound of grass, though it varies widely between different kinds of grasses. So if all the 10 to 14 inches were stored in the soil and used by the grass, it would be enough to grow 4,500 to 6,200 pounds of grass. That's enough grass to grow some mighty juicy beef and still leave enough grass on the ground to absorb the rainfall, protect the soil, and hold temperatures down.

Ranges Lacking in Cover

The trouble is that some ranges don't have the cover to absorb the rainfall and protect the soil. Let's see what happens to the rainfall on bare ranges.

(Continued on page 7)

(Continued from page 6—Conservation Time Passages)

Soil Conservation Service technicians assisting ranchers in soil conservation districts have made numerous tests on moisture penetration following rains. Here are some interesting and revealing examples of moisture penetrations.

On a denuded range near Robert Lee, moisture from a badly needed 2.25-inch rain penetrated only three inches. This means that only about one-half inch of the rain soaked in, the other one and three-fourths inches, or 75 per cent, ran off. Within four days, the range was parched and shimmering in the hot sun because the little moisture that soaked in had evaporated. You had to count that 2.25-inch rain as a total loss on bare rangelands.

In May, 1957, a hard 5.5-inch rain fell on rangelands south of San Angelo. The drouth was broken on some ranges! Where good grass cover existed, moisture penetration was as much as 36 inches. Most of the rain had been absorbed and a mighty good crop of forage was the result.

On bare ranges the story was quite different. The soil was wet only for about 10 inches, indicating that no more than two inches of the rain was absorbed. The other 3.5 inches ran off, taking soil with it, washing out fences, and flooding lowlands.

A follow-up check on these same ranges in September told the sad story. A crop of quick-growing, low value annuals had come and gone, the moisture had been used by poor forage plants and weeds or lost by evaporation, and the ranges were as bare as ever.

So, what if you do get 15 or 20 inches of rainfall? On the average, one-third is ineffective. If you let 50 to 75 per cent of the rest waste off the range by runoff or evaporation, you end up with seven inches or less to grow forage—and that is getting right down to desert conditions!

This desert condition is vastly different from the way the ranges looked when first settled. There has been a lot of change in many ranges since the early settlers brought their livestock, almost 100 years ago. This change has not always been to the good!

Nature Was in Balance Then

In early days, the range country of the West was covered with a blanket of grass. There wasn't much waste of rainfall. The rains soaked into the soil, where the moisture was stored to grow more grass, or the excess emerged as springs. Nature was in balance.

Disturb nature's balance just a little and a cycle of changes and responses begins that may span the duration of a human generation or many generations.

The grandchildren of today are witnessing effects of what their grandfathers started almost a century ago. A lot of the early-day ranchers, our ancestors, didn't believe in "wasting" the grass. It was "unlimited."

Interesting evidence of the attitudes of the early-day ranchers is a resolution passed in the '90s by members of a prominent livestock association without a dissenting vote, "Resolved, that none of us know, or care to know, anything about grasses, native or otherwise, outside of the fact that for the present, there are lots of them, the best on record, and we are after getting the most out of them while they last."

Grandsons Conservative Ranchers

It is significant to note that many of the grandsons of the resolution signers are among the best grass-conservation ranchers in the state. But those pioneers wanted to get all the grass, and they did! Huge ranches were established, fortunes were made on the grass as they got "the most out of them while they lasted."

What happened when they didn't last? Nature's balance was disturbed more than "just a little." Instead of the 15 or 20 inches average annual rainfall being absorbed by the soil, much of it was wasted by runoff or evaporation. The environmental conditions were changed and the vegetation changed with them. Where once there were grass plains, desert weeds and shrubs came in. Where excellent forage once grew, now unpalatable, even noxious weeds and shrubs, and low-producing desert grasses grow in too many places.

Just look at your range. The vegetation that grows on it is a most reliable indicator of the conditions that exist. Desert plants testify that desert conditions exist—low moisture, high soil temperatures, and high evaporation.

Bare ground is the most reliable indication of a desert condition. Where no moisture enters the soil, no plants grow. But nature tries to cover all the earth. Lying in wait are seeds of numerous rapid-growing annuals that can germinate, grow, and produce seed quickly after a rain. Comes a rain and "the desert blooms like a rose." But soon the little moisture that was absorbed is used up or lost by evaporation and the area goes back to a bare range.

Then there are other plants that can survive for longer periods under extremely arid conditions, the desert shrubs. They move in. Cactus, for example, has an extensive root system that runs just under the surface of the soil, awaiting the smallest shower. These roots have almost miraculous absorptive capacities. A shower falls and you can almost see the cactus pads, or leaves, swell with the moisture being absorbed.

Other shrubs, like creosotebush, tarbush and mesquite, in addition to extensive root systems, have the ability to curl up their leaves, or turn them away from the direct rays of the sun. Nearly all desert plants have a waxy covering on their leaves to reduce evaporation. Many of them drop their leaves as a last resort, only to leaf out again when moisture comes.

Nature has even developed a few perennial grasses that can exist in extremely dry areas. For the most part they are small, low-producing, shallow-rooted plants that green up and mature seed quickly after a rain. Red grama, hairy tridens, fluffgrass, and burrograss are examples of the drouth-tolerant desert grasses.

So, look at those ranges. You can bet your best pair of boots that if desert plants are growing there, the rancher is ranching under desert conditions regardless of his average annual rainfall.

You can't do anything about increasing the rainfall but you surely can do something about making effective use of what you do get.

Keeping a cover on the range to help absorb the rains, protect the soil, and reduce unnecessary evaporation is a must on every ranch. Don't take off all the cover. Some ranchers don't want to let anything go "to waste," but that cover isn't wasted. It has a manyfold benefit, far surpassing its value as forage.

First, that cover serves as an absorptive blanket to help the soil soak up the rainfall when it comes. Second, it protects the soil from eroding. Third, the cover serves as a cooling mulch to keep the sun's hot rays off the soil, and from evaporating the soil moisture. A fourth, and sometimes mighty important benefit is that surface mulch is an excellent seedbed for young grass seedlings.

Temperatures in bare soils sometimes reach 145 to 150 degrees on hot, sunny days in July and August. This is enough not only to evaporate all the soil moisture, but also thoroughly sterilize the surface as well. Milk is pasteurized at 142 degrees for 30 minutes.

So, don't let that rainfall record fool you. Rainfall doesn't mean a thing unless your range can make effective use of it. It takes a grass cover to grow grass!

Reprinted from THE CATTLEMAN

OCTOBER 1960

(Continued from page 1—Wildfires of 2011, Lessons We Can Learn)

"The effects of wildfire are similar to the effects of prescribed fire." This statement is based on scientific research following the huge Amarillo Complex Fire in 2006. Researchers concluded that the impacts to grasses were no different than a properly carried out prescribed burn. What must be understood is that it rained 15 inches in the first six months following the Amarillo fire, and that the next three years had average or above average rainfall. The effects of the 2011 wildfires were not at all similar to a prescribed fire due to the intensity of the fires, and the prolonged drought which preceded and followed the fires. The lesson: **Scientific information collected in one place under one set of conditions does not necessarily apply to other places, other times, or other conditions.** *"Fire does not kill grass."* On the contrary, much of the perennial grass cover is completely dead on millions of acres burned in 2011. The fires and the drought occurred in tandem and each exacerbated the damage of the other. Some avid promoters of prescribed burning choose only to see the beneficial aspects of fire while failing to see the damaging impacts. The lesson: **A wide-angle perspective and objectivity are always better than tunnel vision or blind paradigms.**

Natural resource experts and professionals provide a valuable service to landowners; their contributions are respected and appreciated. But there are times when the experts get it wrong. In times like this, the gut feelings and experience of committed land stewards provides perhaps the best illumination and direction. The effects of such natural calamities cannot be evaluated by their ecological impacts alone. The impacts must be considered in a holistic sense of human, economic, ecological impacts, and all the intricate interrelationships of these factors.

Yes, the land is resilient; designed that way by the Creator. Texas lands will recover from the damaging drought and fires of 2011. That recovery will proceed better and faster under proper stewardship. The good news is that 2012 is already off to a good start, and will undoubtedly be better than 2011.

In Palo Pinto County, Texas, wildfires burned many recreational areas that included Possum Kingdom State Park and dozens of homes. (Photo Credit: Ricky Linex, USDA-NRCS)

Looking Back In Time to See Forward

Story by Ricky Linex, USDA-NRCS

Toward the end of 2011, a fence-line photo contest was held among NRCS employees who work in 51 north-central Texas counties. The concept was that this drought we have been in is really one of those making lemonade out of lemons chances, for we have to learn from the power of observation. NRCS folks spend a lot of time in their pickup going from one landowner to another, and from one side of the county to another. So why not use some of that time to sharpen your observational skills, which will lead to more knowledge and confidence when discussing with landowners/operators the effects of drought, proper stocking rates, rotational grazing, the control of native and exotic wildlife, rainfall infiltration, and runoff. An impartial panel of judges selected the photo (right), taken by Rodney Duus, NRCS district conservationist in Mills County, on December 1, 2011, as the overall winner.

(Continued on page 9)

Letter From a Lost Texas Prairie

Poem by Jessica Manley
Alamo Area Texas Master Naturalists, Class 25

You saw me this morning,
I was radiant in pale first light – diffused by cloud and canopy,
I saw you too.

We each walked the path of our years – dissecting the understory.

You glowed, fresh dew on my blue-stemmed heart,
We all followed; taking turns with one another – fairly sharing the role of understudy.

You never stopped smiling,
I was inspired by you,
Your strict code of order, your permeability,
Your steadfast resilience –
Even as I tread the path alone I sensed you – watching me.

Several times you brushed my arm in passing,
I noticed you,
We all noticed you.

The smell of gin mingled with your breath and made us giddy,
Then your eyes went misty with a long-forgotten memory.

Canyon fog welled up around us as we descended behind you,
And we listened intently as you retold the story of your past.

By the time you finished, we were spent standing still in the spot you left us,
I saw you blink back a tear,
Just as the midday sun burned away the residue of our history together,
Then, you sighed a Blackland Prairie sigh and the seed was spread.

(Continued from page 9—Looking Back In Time to See Forward)

As demonstrated, a fence-line photo taken over a property line reveals a stark change in plants, along with plant health from one property to another reflecting the level of management of the owners. The photo titled "*cross fencing helps control grazing"* was submitted after the photo contest by Wynne Whitworth, NRCS rangeland management specialist in Jack County, and shows her grandfather, W.H. Whitworth in a photo taken by a Soil Conservation Service photographer in Kendall County on August 31, 1959. Mr. Whitworth hopped the fence and is standing across the property line looking at his land. Both photos, separated by 52 years, shows that landowners and conservationists still have a lot to learn regarding land care and land stewardship.

There are many excuses that influence how we treat the land, but land ownership comes with a responsibility. Few voices can say the correct words as clear and precise as stated in *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold. "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect," stated Leopold. Today, land stewards much like W. H. Whitworth in 1959, realize that land is a precious resource that must be nurtured and managed properly for it to flourish. Through good times and bad, from drought years to excessive summer-long heat waves, land stewards still put the health of the land above short-term economic gains.

Photo courtesy of Wynne Whitworth, USDA-NRCS

What We Say About Ourselves

Op-ed by Bill Neiman, Owner
Native American Seed Company

As a people, there are certain times that come along when each person has to step up … and say it. More importantly, each person must do something about it.

The way we waste water is outrageous.

While pedaling as fast as the wheels will turn on the sometimes toxic, mostly exotic landscape treadmill … we are spending up the rest of the best. The drought has revealed what's behind the curtain. Setting aside agriculture's mother lode of water that is used to feed us; people have long embraced the competitive quest "to keep up with the Jones"... especially the Jones' front yard.

Frivolously, the people pour Texas' clean drinking water onto the ground. The enameled *Yard of the Month* sits firmly planted upon the thirsty courthouse lawns. Every land steward knows that along with rights, comes responsibility. But in town and country, our private property, right of capture culture clings to a pride resting on street corners, residing in the thick green lushness of human mono-cultured sterility afforded by St Augustine Caribbean-carpet grass lawns. Out on the golf-course-green African Bermuda grass, familiar symbols of luxury and wealth, one cannot help but notice the future of becoming native to this place is being swept away in the leaf catcher's bags. Cheap water-soaked lawn clippings make their weekly haul to the municipal sanitary landfill. On the edge of town out of sight and mind, the bags full of spent waters from leading state houses, local banks, utility offices, churches, schools, and most other official places of community business along with residential lawns get buried before the sun goes down.

Together, the exotic lawn clippings go with the day's haul of finely shredded tax documents and soiled disposable diapers. All neatly taped, tied and bound in bundles. All heaped together and compacted by the stompers, which build new modern mountains with always-priced-for-less Chinese packages discarded by the carload trips back and forth to home and big box stores. 101 degrees outside and the wind is blowin' while crisp, clean clothes are tumblin' in the all-electric dryer. Air conditioners are set on max cool, just to make sure. Yes, energy use is directly tied to water use, so selling water to coal burning power plants is big business. The last clean river goes to the highest bidder. Visual messages silently scream day after day. Old people wonder what the graffiti means on the cement wall down at the drainage ditch. Ask any kid; they get the message about what's being said—about what's been done.

As our graceful social hands of docile patience and the life-giving waters run dry, now is the time to rise up and become a citizen, again. It is entirely up to us to make the change in what we say about ourselves.
(Photos courtesy of Native American Seed Company)

St. Augustine grass on the courthouse lawn, right, requires 160 inches of water per year. Plus, 70 percent of clean drinking water is used on landscapes. Since the summer of 1980, our work has focused on water conservation by restoring landscapes, left, to native habitats.

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