**NRCS 90 Years series three – Jeff Zimprich with the Grassland Coalition**

**Keith**

My honor to bring in as our guest here this morning, Jeff Zimprich. He is the past state conservationist with the NRCS office and kind of back on the home farm. And I think you got a bunch of other titles. But, Jeff, nice to have you here with us this morning.

 **Jeff Zimprich**

Keith, glad to be here. It's really an honor to be able to speak on this important topic.

**Keith**

Yes, and I do appreciate that. I think one of the things you are very involved in yet is the South Dakota grassland coalition.

**Jeff Zimprich**

You bet. The you know, the the coalition has been around for a long time now and 20 almost getting to be 25 years. And so it's done a lot of work and a lot of folks don't realize.

But South Dakota, you know, we're a grassland state. And we were 96% grasslands when we were European settlers first arrived. Now we're about half grassland. And grassland producers across South Dakota do an incredible job of caring for that resource. And the Grassland Coalition has been doing a lot of work to try to help them be better managers and help them survive on their ranches.

**Keith**

And we're talking here about grasslands, but there is kind of a misconception, if I may say, when you're talking about conservation, we think just that grasslands. But conservation includes all of the ag industry, whether again, the grain side, the grassland side and right into our livestock.

**Jeff Zimprich**

 Exactly. Yep. Conservation is important. Important for any natural resource, you know, and I'd go as far as to say this, that I think any of you, any of us that own even a smallest piece of land, you know, whether you own just, a city lot in Sioux Falls, you have natural resources and you have a responsibility to care for them. So I think it really behooves all of us to learn all we can and do everything we can to care for these natural resources, because they take care of us.

 Keith

And because of that, the NRCS has a number of programs in place that I know you've had a chance to work with over the years.

 **Jeff Zimprich**

 Yeah. You bet. You know, my career spanned nearly 40 years. I got a chance to work in several states and even spent some time in Washington, DC. So I got to deal with a lot of programs, and there's some great ones out there. You know, the Environmental Quality Incentives program. Now, the is just kind of a flagship program to help conservation, producers put practices on the land.

And then the Conservation Stewardship program also helps them really improve the management. It's great to have the practices, but it's kind of how you manage, the landscape, you know, on the on the livestock side, you could think about it, you could have water tanks and you can have fences. But if you don't use those tools to help you manage how the livestock graze, you really aren't getting the full benefit.

**Keith**

I'm sure one question that you get asked quite often is why is conservation practices so important?

 **Jeff Zimprich**

 Well, the bottom line of it is, is that there's just a small part of this planet that can actually be used to raise, food and, you know, graze livestock. And so when you think about the fact that our population on the planet is over a billion people and growing, and we've got this limited resource of, natural resources that are really capable of producing food for all of us.

It's it behooves all of us to care for those. So there's there's examples throughout history of civilizations that really kind of cease to exist because they didn't care for natural resources. And I think that we're on a good path. We're doing a good job of trying to care for those.

 **Keith**

 And that kind of brings right up, looking at things to keep in mind to help protect. Okay, we talked about livestock, but to help our land in general.

 **Jeff Zimprich**

Right, exactly. And so much of what we know about conservation today, we really learned by watching some of those natural resources. And I think a great example is, is that there's a buzz going around right now called soil health and soil health practices. And it's kind of funny when I reflect back on my career, the beginning of my career, it was all just about erosion.

We were just stopping erosion. We didn't really understand soil health like we do today. But today there's all this buzz. And so much of what we know about soil health. We learned from grasslands because they were the part of South Dakota that really developed the soils that make agriculture strong in the state. And so the bottom line of it is, is that we look at grasslands, we see all of those principles in practice, and we can learn so much from them. And and they apply to all land uses. You're right.

 **Keith**

You said you had spent some time in Washington, D.C. I know what you look under the the past, administration, the Biden administration, and USDA secretary, then Tom Vilsack, that talked a lot about climate smart agriculture. How does this all tie in?

 **Jeff Zimprich**

 Well, you know, the bottom line of it is, is kind of the way I used to always talk about it when, I served with NRCS in South Dakota was, is that there could be a lot of debate about climate change.

And I, I don't think that that debates that important, to be honest. I think what we know is that weather in South Dakota is variable. It has been forever, and it will continue to be. And so there's going to be years when we get more rain than what we may need, and there's going to be years we get less.

And so our natural resources can help cared for that. You know, a healthy soil could absorb more rain, a healthy soil can store more rain and provide it back to crops. So I think it just really, again, is makes sense for all of us to try to care for those natural resources and use the practices that can help us do that.

**Keith**

We talk about the keys to, better conservation practices. As you listen to producers, meet with producers, talk to them, whatever the case is here, Jeff, what are some of the misses when it comes to conservation efforts?

 **Jeff Zimprich**

 Well, I think one of the misses is that, you know what really took me a while to observe many times in my career was, is that land use decisions kind of play heavily. So and what I mean by that is every soil is created different. And one of the famous quotes that I like from the founder of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, SCS at the time, Soil Conservation Service at the time was Hugh Hammond Bennett and Hugh Hammond's. One of his quotes was you have to care for soils, you know, based on really their capabilities and and what it's going to take to protect them.

So in other words, we're not all created equal. Not all of us have the same athletic ability. Not all of us have the same smarts toward English or math. And soils are the same. And sometimes we try to push soils to do more than they can. And I see examples when I drive across South Dakota, where we're taking the soil and we think we want it to be a cornfield or a soybean field, and maybe it's really not suited for that.

And we and we in a way, fight mother Nature, right, to get her to kind of do what we want her to do, when really if we just pick the right land use, it makes it so much easier. And that's, I think, a great example of how grassland can do so much for our state.

 **Keith**

 Well, over the course of the last couple of weeks, again, we've been talking about the NRCS and celebrating 90 years and you look at the way technology has changed, looked at the way things are being practiced today. Things have really changed. I really kind of trying to keep up with technology, haven't they?

 **Jeff Zimprich**

 Oh, it's it's just unbelievable. Yeah. How we have added so much to that. And I just go back to the things that, you know, when, when NRCS, when I first started working for NRCS and you know, I'm, I'm happy to say it didn't spend 90 years.

But when I worked at NRCS you know, just the changes that happened in that the things that we learned over that span, the things that we didn't understand about Mother Nature. And now when you just look at the technology that producers have at their fingertips, whether it be photography or knowledge about the soil and just kind of how things work, that's that's all on top of what they know about the genetics of their livestock herd or know about what's going on in the cab of the tractor. It's just incredible.

 **Keith**

All that right at your fingertips. Jeff. Hey, I appreciate, you taking some time here, being with us today, just talking about the importance of our conservation, conservation practices. Thank you. Sir.

 **Jeff Zimprich**

Thanks for having me. It's been a pleasure. I had a great career with NRCS, and it's still on. Still trying to do good things with the Grassland Coalition. So thanks for having me.

 **Keith**

That's our special guest here today, Jeff Zimprich. He's the past state conservationist with the NRCS office. Again, as we celebrate 90 years of being in service and talking about the importance of our conservation practices, we will continue with much, much more this morning with our five State Farm reports only on WNAX.