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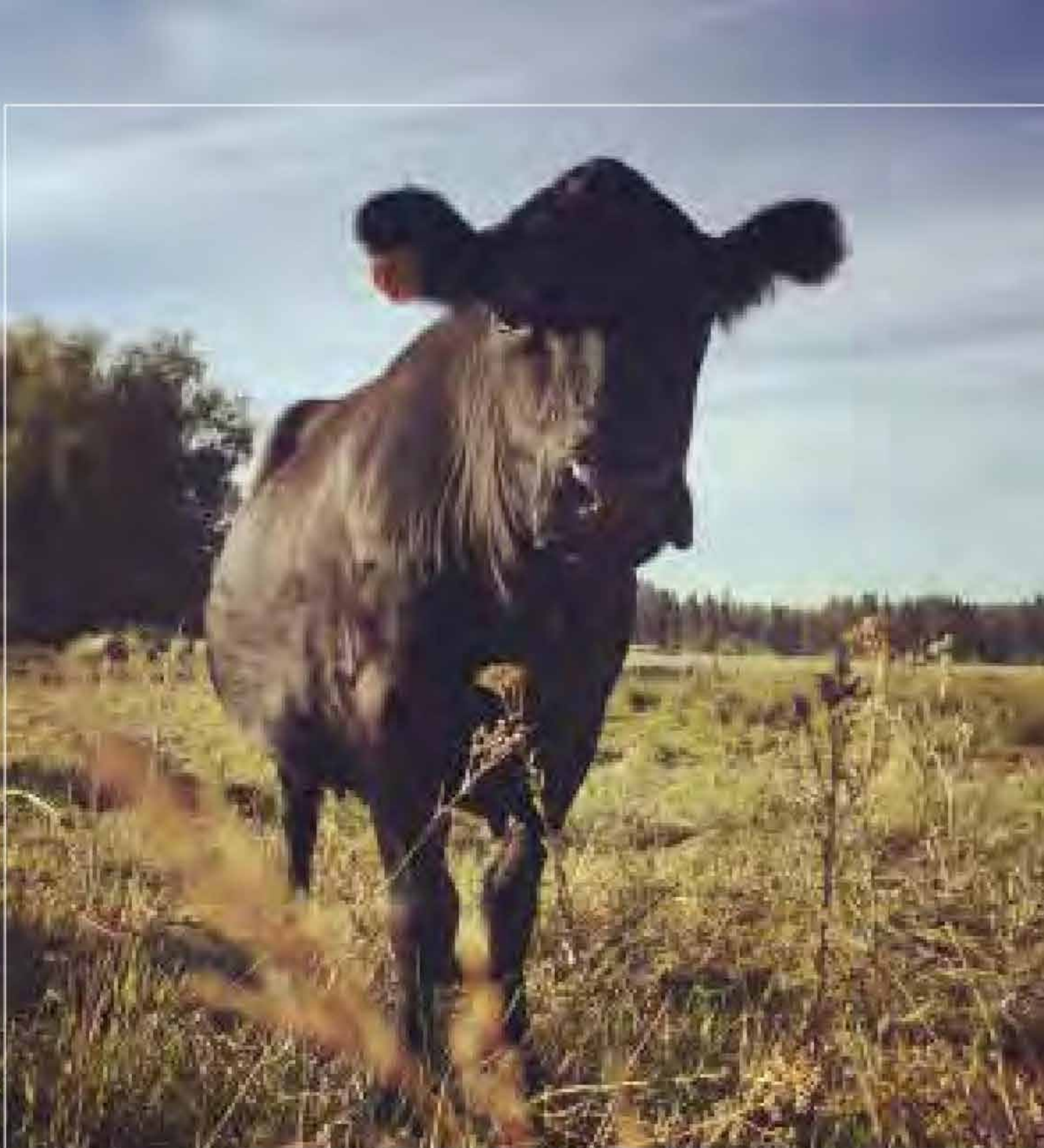
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What happens when cows **GO AWAY?**

By Monica Gokey

The reasons to buy a ranch are as varied as the selection of properties up for sale. But for many buyers, the beauty and aesthetics of a piece of property are key selling points.

Maintaining the integrity of a landscape over time can be a tricky job, that many land buyers don't fully understand, and that has far-reaching consequences. As land use changes, so does the land.

Removing cows (or sheep) from a landscape kickstarts a set of ecological changes. Tall, lush grasslands gradually give way to shrubs and trees. It's a natural transition that takes decades. When working ranches become leisure properties or subdivisions, the process is put in motion.

Fourth-generation rancher Beth Robinette of the Lazy R Ranch in eastern Washington has watched this change — called

"ecological succession" by biologists — play out on a neighboring piece of land.

If you stare down the fence-line separating the Robinettes' working cattle ranch and a neighboring subdivision, the differences are stark. Robinette guesses the subdivision next door has been cattle-free for at least 50 years.

On Lazy R side, you see an open forest with tall grass (see photo). "That's where we've been managing with grazing," she adds.

On the other side of the fence there are fewer trees, "but the notable thing there is pretty solid brush. It's maybe 3-4 feet high

Viewing cattle as not just a consumer of a resource, but as a management tool can diversify management options for landowners with non-agricultural goals.

PHOTO BY BETH ROBINETTE, LAZY R RANCH.

and you can't walk through it." Shrubs like nootka rose, teasel and snowberry dominate the subdivision side. Over time, those plants occluded the grasses.

In other words, the relationship between grazers and grasses is intimate: you need one to have the other.

And to truly understand this relationship, it helps to rewind a couple million years.

North America's grasslands evolved alongside a series of dominant grazers — first, mastodons and mammoths. In more recent history, bison roamed the prairie in massive herds, chomping up grass in what modern pasture gurus call a high-density grazing pattern.

North Dakota State University professor and grassland ecologist Dr. Kathryn Yurkonis points to disturbance as a key element of grassland health.

"Grazing is one flavor of disturbance," she explains. "You need to have biomass removal pretty regularly," which is a service cows and sheep offer when they graze.

"Fire is another flavor of disturbance," Yurkonis adds. She points to the southern Plains, where ranchers have eagerly embraced fire as a pasture-enhancement tool. (That management strategy is called patch-burn grazing. It, too, has roots in bison-era times.)

"Fire helps release nutrients and get rid of some of the standing stuff maybe a cow doesn't want. When you have that fire, you suddenly have a clean

slate," Yurkonis says. "The fresh new grass that comes up is the candy — or the Snickers bar. That fresh new regrowth attracts a lot of things to come eat it."

Zoom forward to the present: Fire plays less of a regenerative role across North America than it once did. And since the continent's massive herds of bison were hunted to near extinction, cows and sheep have become the surrogate grazers, albeit in smaller numbers.

"Grasslands are substantially different than in the bison era," Yurkonis says.

The changes that've taken place across North America on a large scale since the settling of the West are emblematic of changes that take place on a micro scale when working ranches become non-working leisure properties or subdivisions.

What happens when cows **GO AWAY?**

A fenceline splits the Lazy R Ranch in eastern Washington from a neighboring subdivision. Grass dominates the left side of the photo, a working cattle ranch. Shrubbery dominates the right side of the photo, the subdivision.



What happens when cows
GO AWAY?

AN ABUNDANCE OF GRASS IS THE RESULT OF DELIBERATE MANAGEMENT DECISIONS.

PHOTO BY BETH ROBINETTE, LAZY R RANCH.

In realtor Tate Jarry's experience, buyers on today's market for ranch real estate are looking to keep a foot in the best of both worlds. The associate broker for Live Water Properties in Jackson, Wyo., says most buyers he works with intend to keep some aspect of a working property working.

"The main focus for our buyers isn't straight recreation," Jarry explains. "There needs to be some ag component, or a tax break, something that lets [a landowner] generate income."

Many of today's buyers are interested in expanding their land holdings — especially in irrigated land, or property adjacent to public land.

Jarry guesses about 95 percent of the ranch properties he sees are cash sales — and the average sale is well into the seven figures.

"There's an old adage, 'these ranches don't wash their face,'" Jarry says. "Back in the day we had

these huge cattle ranches because you could buy land with cattle. That doesn't happen anymore."

Jarry finds it's rare anymore to find buyers who want to move to rural America and live there year-round. But a remote home for six months of the year with some income-generation potential? That has good value in today's ranch realty market.

One of the first things Jarry does after a sale is introduce the buyer to the local NRCS office. The National Resources Conservation Service, under the wing of the USDA, helps landowners (including farmers and ranchers) with on-the-ground technical assistance. The agency also oversees a handful of programs that incentivize habitat conservation.

Grassland ecologist Dr. Yurkonis is also quick to point landowners to public agencies like NRCS.

"It's especially important for people who aren't tuned into production," Yurkonis says. "People are buying a property because they appreciate the beauty and aesthetics of the landscape. What needs to happen with that kind of a purchase is maybe an extra effort to be a steward of the land. There are a lot of resources for those people."

Yurkonis herself has her hands on a particularly exciting piece of property to steward. The Oakville Prairie is a 1,000-acre research site owned by North Dakota State University.

"Faculty realized it needed some kind of management to maintain its ecological integrity," Yurkonis explains. The Oakville Prairie has remained relatively untouched since the 1960s.

Yurkonis points to grasslands across the West that've sat idle since bison were ex-

terminated. With no grazing, haying, or burning, those sites are changing, noticeably with more shrub and tree growth.


Yurkonis' enthusiasm is palpable when she talks about reintroducing grazing and fire to the Oakville Prairie. The research site is a grassland scientist's dream — it's virgin in the sense that it's never been plowed or been put under heavy agricultural use. But without grazers or fire, the Oakville Prairie, too, is slowly changing. Restoring it to tall grass prairie is an incredible research opportunity, she says.

At the Lazy R in eastern Washington, rancher Beth Robinette doubles as a certified field professional in holistic management — a ranching philosophy that capitalizes on the unique ecological relationship grazers and grasslands.

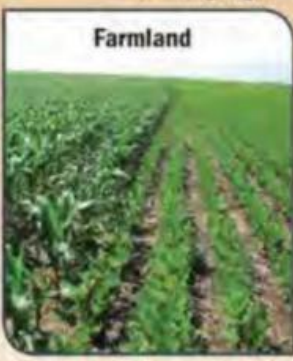

She can visualize restoring the property next door.



PHOTO BY MATT VINCENT

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What happens when cows **GO AWAY?**

Balancing Elk & Cattle

Hunters want more elk. Ranchers want fewer elk. It's a standoff that's battered wildlife managers across the West.

"Elk currently reside in ecologically incomplete parts of their historical range," says North Dakota State University wildlife biologist Dr. Jay Boulanger.

Despite a reduction of their historical habitat, elk are successfully carving out their own little niches in a modern West.

Some populations of elk are finding safe harbor where there once was none. A rancher might want elk numbers kept in check, while a leisure property owner next door may enjoy hosting elk for aesthetic reasons.

That has conflicts between elk and ranchers on the rise in many parts of the country.

It comes at a time when wildlife managers are increasingly unable to rely on hunting pressure to control elk numbers. A 2017 U.S. Fish and Wildlife survey shows a 20 percent decline in big-game hunters over the past five years. On the flip side, wildlife watching and photography is the fastest growing wildlife-related activity.

"We know that elk and cattle can co-graze where they overlap. Research shows that relationship is good for elk," Dr. Boulanger says. "The cattle are the ones creating the nutrition. If there were no cattle around, elk might not be able to keep up with their nutritional needs -- habitat [succession] would catch up to the elk. Cattle have taken over for the bison in today's modern world."

"Ranchers are in a tough situation. If cattle ranching improves habitat, you might have more fit elk. Then you might have more elk," Boulanger says.

The downside for cattle producers is two-fold: elk are carriers of bovine brucellosis, and they're increasingly competing with cows for winter feed.

A study published over the summer showed that female elk learned to dodge hunters -- a skill that improved with age.

Wildlife biologists like Dr. Boulanger wonder whether that type of behavioral learning is also at play when elk develop regional savvy about where to find food, or where to hide out during hunting season.

"If I was going to transition that brushy area back to grassland, I'd start with goats to knock that brush back, then high-density cattle to trample that brush and open the canopy for grasses to come up," Robinette explains.

"And then you really time your grazing with the health of the species you want to encourage. Want more grass? Plan grazing so as not to put too much pressure on it."

The take-away here is that new landowners should plan to manage for what they want.

Visualizing a property 10, 20, or even 30 years into the future can help inform the on-the-ground decisions of today -- decisions like whether or not to lease ground to a local rancher to keep pastures open, to manage for timber, or any other desired qualities on a landscape. ♡

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