

Bringing it together



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Our Mission:

Agren, Inc. responds to agricultural and environmental challenges by providing comprehensive, integrated services to groups and individuals to positively impact our natural resources. The Agren team is dedicated to achieving client objectives through a commitment to quality and excellence.

New Projects Focus on Prescribed Fire, Grassbanks, Pollution Prevention

Agren has recently received funding on a variety of new projects, including:

Prescribed fire educational outreach.

The Loess Hills Alliance has received funding from the Iowa Department of Natural Resources's (IDNR) REAP Program to provide educational outreach to Loess Hills landowners. The focus of outreach will be to increase the understanding and application of prescribed fire to restore native plant communities and revive economic opportunities associated with livestock grazing. The Loess Hills Alliance has contracted with Agren to handle much of this work.

"We want to help landowners to understand that the native prairie is worth keeping and protecting," said Bob Moritz, chairman of Loess Hills Alliance. "Red cedars, which can gobble up a prairie in 10 to 15 years, have such a head start in the Loess Hills that it's impossible to catch up by sawing them down. We need something more consuming on a big scale, and fire does this really well."

The Loess Hills Alliance is contracting with Agren to distribute prescribed fire information directly to landowners through small group meetings and one-on-one visits.

"We have equipment for prescribed burns located in each of our counties," Moritz said. "We also have people who are trained in managing prairie burns. These are available to people who want to use them. We're trying to reach landowners who are willing to step forward and try something new, because neighbors follow neighbors."

Grassbank system to benefit cattle producers and conservationists. Agren has received funding from the Iowa Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Conservation Innovation Grant program to develop and demonstrate a grassbank system in Iowa's Loess Hills. Grassbanks offer a unique way to restore grasslands threatened by invasive woody vegetation while stimulating grass-based livestock production.

"Grassbanks are used in Wyoming, Montana, Arizona and New Mexico," said Tom Buman of Agren. "To our knowledge, however, there's never been a grassbank proposed for east of the Missouri River." Grassbanks allow livestock producers to restore natural plant communities and increase forage production on their own land, even as they continue to raise livestock in a grass-based production system.

"A grassbank can be a farm or ranch that's set up to receive stock from private landowners while these landowners rejuvenate their grasslands," Buman said. This project will establish a grassbank system on 750 acres of public and private land in the Loess Hills.

"This is a win-win situation that can help return cow-calf herds to the Loess Hills while promoting conservation," Buman said.

Outreach program focuses on proper handling of hazardous materials and solid waste. As part of the Farm*A*Syst program, Agren is developing new ways to help Iowa's Regional Collection Center and landfill associations educate rural Iowans about the proper disposal and handling of hazardous materials and solid waste on farmsteads. "In urban areas, municipalities have done a good job of explaining what can go in the landfill and what can't," Buman said. "In rural areas, residents need to be informed about these issues to help reduce surface and groundwater pollution." This will be accomplished by providing statewide training and instructional materials and helping Regional Collection Centers and landfill associations carry out effective outreach to rural Iowans.

Project Promotes Conservation Practices Among Absentee Landowners

An innovative approach to educate out-of-state agricultural landowners is paving the way for more conservation practices, including wildlife habitat, on absentee landlords' farms.

"Of the 3.4 million owners of private ag land in the United States, more than 42 percent don't operate any of the land they own and lease out all or part of the property," said Jamie Ridgely with Agren. "Also, absentee agricultural landowners lag owner-operators by 64 percent when you compare enrollment in the Conservation Reserve Program and the Wetlands Reserve Program."

Barriers that inhibit the use of conservation practices and Farm Bill programs on absentee landowners' property include:

- Absentee landowners' extensive reliance on the operator to identify and address natural resource concerns.
- Lack of direct communication between Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) field staff and absentee landowners.
- Absentee landowners' reluctance to commit to long-term lease agreements, which are often required for program sign-up.

Reaching out to absentee landowners

To meet these challenges, the M&M Divide RC&D, in cooperation with the Carroll Soil and Water Conservation District, implemented a successful pilot in early 2005 to demonstrate and evaluate a new approach to contacting out-of-state landowners owning farmland in Carroll County, Iowa.

"A combination of live and recorded teleconference and personal calls were used to educate absentee landowners on natural resource conservation and opportunities for program enrollment in Carroll County," Ridgely said.

Goats Enhance Economic Opportunities in the Loess Hills

While the invasion of woody vegetation is destroying pasture in the Loess Hills, goat browsing may provide a unique solution with multiple benefits for the area's rural communities.

"Invasive species like Eastern red cedar and sumac are taking over in grazing areas due to a lack of prescribed burning," explained Julie Wheelock with Agren. "As the trees shade out the grass and ruin pastures, this threatens the area's cattle industry and the economic well-being of the Loess Hills' farming communities."

Cow-calf production in the Loess Hills region has decreased 43 percent since 1974, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service. Agren staff members are studying the ways goats can provide an effective method of pasture and native prairie renovation in the Loess Hills to revitalize cow-calf production and restore grasslands. "We're assessing the feasibility of a goat browsing enterprise for vegetation management with the added profit potential of meat sales," Wheelock said.

Adapting a proven concept to the Midwest

Goat browsing is a method of biological brush control that has been practiced in the southwestern United States and parts of New Zealand, Australia and Africa for more than 100 years. In February 2005, Agren received a USDA Small Business Innovation Research grant in the area of Rural and Community Development to study whether goat browsing is a viable option for the Midwest.

Since June of 2005 Agren has kept 24 Boer-mix meat goats in Loess Hills pastures near Moorhead, Iowa. Two one-acre paddocks filled with cedar trees, sumac, native grasses and forbs each hold 12

Approximately 14 percent of out-of-state landowners listened to a live or recorded 30-minute interview with Jeff Zimprich, NRCS's Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations, who provided a basic overview of federal conservation programs like EQIP, CRP and more. Also, 13 percent of absentee landowners who participated in a personal telephone conversation requested some level of technical assistance through the local NRCS. "Seven people are now working with NRCS to get land enrolled in a program or improve their conservation efforts," Ridgely added.

To provide the tools and resources absentee landowners need to improve and preserve wildlife habitat and protect soil and water quality, project leaders have sought funding to create a nationwide Center for Absentee Landowners. "This would be a one-stop shop to help absentee landowners evaluate their farm from a conservation standpoint, understand conservation programs available to them, use 'conservation friendly' lease agreements and more," Ridgely said.

Another primary function of the Center includes research on the best methods to reach out to absentee landowners, Ridgely added. "We hope to provide sound advice and assistance to like-minded organizations as they work to educate absentee landowners about natural resources conservation on ag land."

The M&M Divide RC&D has recently been awarded an NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant to work with Agren to reach these goals. The three-year effort will include more pilot projects focused on absentee landowners in Iowa, North Dakota, Wisconsin and Oregon during the next several years. "Also, project leaders will host an expert panel meeting," Ridgely said. "A variety of stakeholders, including absentee landowners and farm managers, will be invited to discuss the best way to reach out to landowners with conservation information so they can get the resources they need."

goats. "We're seeing what the goats are eating and what they do to the native grasses and the invasive species," Wheelock said. "So far we've learned that they really like the sumac, dogwood, and other shrubs and have made less of an impact on cedar trees."



Nanny and kid on pasture in the Loess Hills.

Market research focuses on goat meat

Agren is also studying the market potential for goat meat in nearby metropolitan communities with sizable ethnic populations, including Denison, Storm Lake, Council Bluffs, Omaha and Sioux City.

Later phases of the project will examine ways to commercialize the goat browsing enterprise. One option could include one person who owns the goats and rents them to farmers for vegetation management.

"For the Loess Hills area it's really important to bring all the parts of the puzzle, including grazing and fire, back together," Wheelock concluded. "Goats aren't a cure-all for managing invasive species, but they can play an important part in bringing back balance to this ecosystem."

New Drought Risk Management Tool Benefits Rangeland Producers

Ranchers take a risk when they graze livestock, assuming there will be enough precipitation to produce the forage needed to sustain and grow their animals. When the risk intensifies with the threat of a prolonged, severe drought, this must be weighed against the difficult decision to liquidate a portion of the herd.

"Reducing the size of the herd is the key to mitigating loss from drought," said Jamie Ridgely with Agren. "But ranchers are reluctant to do this for many reasons, including tax implications, fear that it will rain after they sell, and an emotional connection linked to the value of genetics in their herd."

That's why Agren is researching and developing new non-insurance risk management tools to mitigate the economic risk that rangeland producers face when they decide to sell cows under extreme drought conditions. The project, which includes a partnership agreement with USDA Risk Management Agency, focuses on the arid and semi-arid regions of the United States, including Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, Montana, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, California, Nevada, Utah and Wyoming.

Ranchers test software

Many farmers and ranchers don't have easy access to information and other resources to develop and implement a drought plan, Ridgely noted. In response,

Agren is two-thirds of the way through a three-year project to advance the development of a risk management tool to help rangeland cattle producers use advanced technical information in their decisions to de-stock during drought.

"In March of 2004 we held a meeting in Nebraska City, Neb., with 18 ranchers and advisors from the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Cooperative Extension Service," Ridgely said. "We asked the ranchers how they deal with drought and discussed what resources would help them."

Agren analyzed 17 different tools related to drought management. Based on input from an expert panel, the team selected Texas A&M's The Grazing Manager tool, which helps producers determine if they'll have enough forage for the cattle they are grazing. "We are taking a proven tool developed for ranchers and are working with a computer programmer to make it more user-friendly," Ridgely said.

In addition, 16 ranchers in Montana, South Dakota, Nevada,

New Mexico, Oklahoma, Kansas and Nebraska are helping test the program, including members of the Zuni Tribe in New Mexico and the Sioux and Assiniboine tribes on Montana's Fort Peck Reservation.

Part-time Agren employee and retired rancher Rob Ravenscroft is working one-on-one with these ranchers to help them overcome the learning curve. "We'll be working through the winter to modify and improve the software so ranchers can use it successfully for drought management planning," Ravenscroft said.



Dr. Jerry Volesky, University of Nebraska Range Specialist, reviews forage utilization concepts with ranchers attending Agren's Rapid City software training for The Grazing Manager.

Agren Offers Native Prairie Seed

From big bluestem to blazing star, Agren sells a wide variety of high-quality prairie grass seed mixes and forbs.

"All of our seed is harvested in, or derived from seed, harvested in the Loess Hills," said Stan Buman with Agren. "We've been doing this for more than four years, and customers have included private landowners, county conservation boards, the Nature Conservancy, and non-profit organizations."

All seed is sent to a testing lab to determine the composition of the seed in the mix, along with the pure live seed (PLS) content. Test results from the 2005 crop should be back from the lab soon. However, we do have a prairie grass seed mix left from the 2004 crop year that contains native grasses including Little Bluestem, Big Bluestem, Indian grass, and Tall Drop seed. Per 100 pounds of bulk material, there are 79 pounds (PLS) of Little Bluestem, 14.8 pounds (PLS) of Big Bluestem, 0.6 pounds (PLS) of Indian grass, and trace amounts of Tall Drop seed. All forbs are hand collected in the Loess Hills. While quantities are limited, Agren offers the following varieties:

Forbs

Lead Plant
Locoweed
Ground Plum
Rough Blazing Star
Pasque Flower

Price

\$15/oz
\$25/oz
\$15/oz
\$20/oz
\$20/oz

Forbs

Penstemon – Large Flowered Beardtongue
Purple Prairie Clover
Narrow-leaf Purple Coneflower
Dalea (Dalea enneandra nutt.)
Rough Gerardia

Price

\$10/oz
\$15/oz
\$10/oz
\$20/oz
\$20/oz

"We are adding more varieties to our lineup for next year and currently have seed available from our fall seed harvest," Buman noted. To order prairie seed mix or forbs, contact Stan Buman at 712-792-6248 or e-mail him at stan@agren-inc.com.

Equine Expertise Leads to Ag Career: Get to Know Jamie Ridgely



Jamie Ridgely

A love of horses sparked Jamie Ridgely's interest in agriculture and led her to an unexpected – but fulfilling – career at Agren.

"Issues connected to agriculture and rural life motivate me," said Jamie, who serves as Agren's project coordinator. "I like being able to work on new ag-related projects every day and help make a difference."

Jamie brings an extensive ag background to Agren. When her grandfather John Roby started showing Belgian horses in early 1980s, he taught six-year-old Jamie how to drive the hitch. After she graduated from Rockwell City-Lytton High School in 1995, Jamie's interest in all things equine took her to Colorado State University, one of the few four-year universities in the country with an equine program. While she considered vet school, Jamie picked another option after earning her animal science degree in 1999.

"That summer I worked as an intern at Agren, and I stayed on part-time through the fall and winter," Jamie recalled. "When I had the chance in March of 2000 to work here full time, I knew it was the right choice."

Maintaining farm ties

As Agren's project coordinator, Jamie helps plan, implement and evaluate projects on a variety of issues ranging from environ-

mental management on Iowa farmsteads to drought and grazing management in the western United States. She also coordinates stakeholder and expert panels, fosters partnering opportunities through Agren, develops and conducts outreach programs and writes grant proposals for water quality initiatives and other agricultural and natural resource conservation projects.

Outside of her responsibilities at Agren, Jamie co-manages R&R Farms, which she runs with her husband, Cory, near Rockwell City. The couple farms in partnership with Cory's parents, Charles and Elaine Ridgely, and are raising their two daughters, Kaylynn, 4, and Jade, 1, on the Ridgely family's century farm southwest of town. Jamie handles the recordkeeping and grain marketing for the corn and soybean operation.

Before the hectic fall harvest season kicks in, the Ridgelys (along with Jamie's parents, Bob and Vicki Roby, and other friends and family) enjoy showing their Belgian horses during the summer and early fall. "We have a hitch of six, and we go to fairs in Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Kansas and Oklahoma," Jamie said. "Sometimes we hit the Denver Stock Show, too."

Though she has limited free time, Jamie volunteers in the Rockwell City community, helping with a local daycare, serving on a planning committee for a new community playground, and participating in a new youth church committee.

"Agren is a great place to work because it's a flexible, family-oriented company that focuses on issues that are important to rural America," Jamie said.

