

The Destruction of Native Sandhills Grasslands: A Rancher's Viewpoint

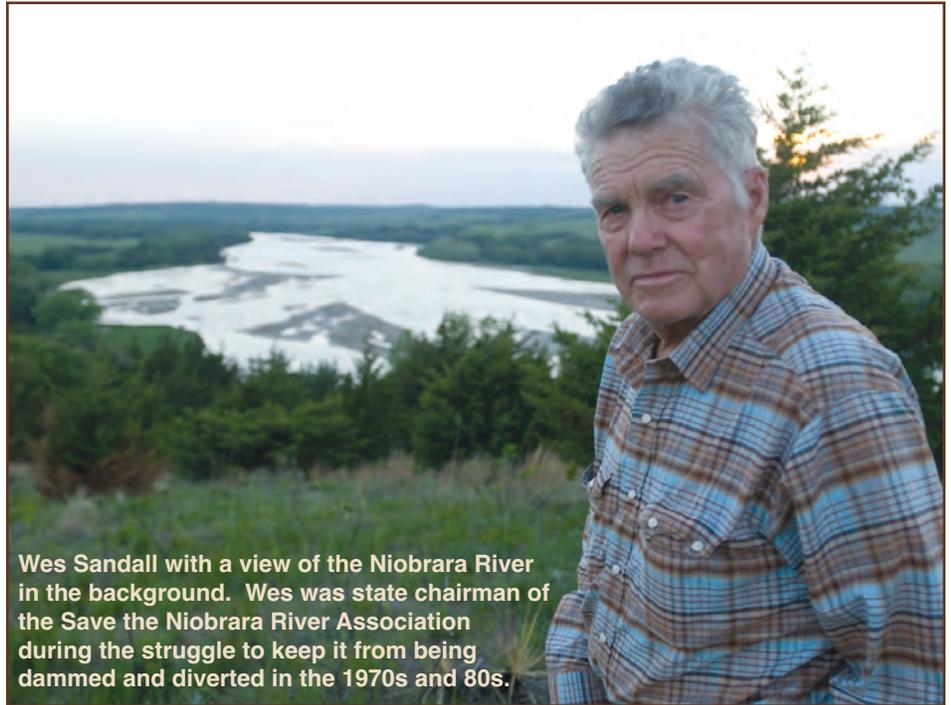
In north central Nebraska the drought of 2012 has been devastating. It has been amplified by severe high temperatures in the 100 to 112 degree range, with 45 to 60 mile per hour winds at times. The pastures were used up on many ranches by August. Following a good rain on April 15 we didn't have another for three and a half months. The extreme heat and high winds burned up the grasses and dry land cornfields. On August 4 we received 2 inches of rain, but that didn't break the drought cycle.

Beef production suffered a lot with poor weight gains, because the grass was dry without moisture to carry the nutrients up from the roots. Beginning in late June and early July a lot of yearling cattle began going to market far ahead of time. In three sales at the Bassett Livestock market more than 20,000 yearlings were sold at much lighter weights than normal. Then ranchers began culling cows. Beef cow numbers are the lowest in 50 years, according to the USDA cattle report.

Feedlots placed more cattle on feed than normal. Later into the next year the supplies of feeder cattle will be short and the demand will climb. This puts the cattle cycle out of its normal pattern. A lot more cows will be going to market the rest of this year. Nation wide the drought has shortened the grass supplies.

During the last two years approximately 100 quarters (each 160 acres) of precious native range has been destroyed by putting it under the plow, and under irrigation. This had taken place in north central Nebraska due to the high price of corn, supported in large part by ethanol production. Twenty-five years ago I said that "a nation that burns it's food" has the possibly of perishing. This area had a similar loss of native ranchland in the sixties and early seventies. Outside investors thought they were going to make a killing on corn.

The area has had an abundance of underground water from the Ogallala Aquifer. The Sandhills obviously consist of sand – which is very fragile. When the topsoil is made bare of cover, it is subject to blowing and it is difficult to get it to stay



Wes Sandall with a view of the Niobrara River in the background. Wes was state chairman of the Save the Niobrara River Association during the struggle to keep it from being dammed and diverted in the 1970s and 80s.

put. When cultivated for corn this is a problem until the corn is high enough to make a cover.

Forty-six percent of Rock County was owned and operated by absentee landowners at one time during the earlier years of irrigation development. Sometimes the crop grew well the first year or two, but high inputs of fertilizer and water were increasingly required. Sand does not hold much water in the top foot of soil. Many of those farmers went bankrupt and abandoned their investment. Some of the ground was sold to another sucker. Corn production nationwide was more than the market could handle and the price was depressed.

Then, more native grass was plowed up in hopes of more corn to help pay the expenses. The eighties came along and investment money disappeared. Then irrigated land became a drag on the market. Banks held title to a lot of land and many people didn't have money enough to farm it. The government was then asked to ride to the rescue. Hefty payments were made to plant some of the cropland back to grass cover under the Conservation Reserve Program.

An unfortunate aspect of high corn prices is that it causes more sandy land to be farmed. That makes for a shortage of grass for cattle producers. Cattle are made for grazing. The cattle industry cannot rely on dry lots. The cattle "beef" business needs grass to survive.

The cow herd has now declined to the lowest level it has been since in the fifties. Drought has taken a toll in recent years and there is not enough grass to support this country's cow herd in many areas, and it isn't logical for most ranchers to increase their herds in these conditions.

Once destroyed, native prairie can never be put back to its original environment. It can be planted back to grasses, but it will never become like the original native range. In sandy country it takes a perfect season to start a "decent" stand of native grass and several years to get it reasonably well established, even if irrigated.

The trend in this rapid loss of native grasslands raises a number of questions. Where is the grass of tomorrow? Where's the beef? What is the future of ranching?

– Wes Sandall