

SHARP BROS. SEED CO.

BUFFALO BRAND

101 E. 4th Street Road
Greeley, CO 80631
970-356-4710

Buffalo.GXY@SharpSeed.com



GROWING SUCCESS

Who would think growing grass could be so hard? Landowners in Crowley County know it is as they try to revegetate land dried up by water sales in the 1980s—land that now has a hard time growing anything but weeds.

Help is available, though, from a West Otero Soil Conservation District program that offers cost-share money and technical assistance.

The program pays 75% of the costs of establishing permanent grass on the old farm ground. It also offers the advice and help of USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), help that has put several thousand acres back into productive grasslands.

Dave Miller, NRCS district conservationist for the Crowley County area, explains that growing grass on land that was once irrigated takes a lot of work and patience.

"You plant it, you baby it, you get down on your hands and knees at the end of the year and hope there's grass," Miller says.

After a century of irrigated farming, the soil is different than it was when the county was all short-grass prairie. It's saltier, so native grasses don't like it. Decades of irrigation loaded it with silt and other sediment and changed the texture from a sandy loam to a clay loam, which also requires different kinds of grasses, Miller says.

And it usually takes water to grow grass well, water that isn't always available because selling water led to the need for revegetation in the first place.

Fields that can be watered the first year or so can get acceptable stands within just a few years, Miller

says.

Some of the land is being revegetated without irrigation water, Miller says. That can take 10 to 15 years and still not succeed unless the first few years include some timely rains.

"It takes about five times as long to get a stand," he says.

WEED WATCH

Controlling weeds is a big part of the program. Landowners can use cattle to graze off the weeds when they are tender and tasty in late spring and early summer, and again in July.

"You can use animals, as long as you use them correctly," Miller says.

Grazing should be limited to short periods, perhaps 10 days, twice during the growing season, he said. The first grazing lets grass pull ahead in the race to build a canopy. The July grazing takes off whatever canopy the fast-growing weeds have created.

Mowing is a weed-control option too, although it must happen more frequently, he says.

Spraying with herbicides will keep weeds down too, Miller says. Broadleaf weeds are easy to control with a chemical like 2,4-D, but grass weeds can be a problem.

The program pays three-quarters of the cost for a cover crop, if needed, as well as weed control, grass seed and irrigation.

"Not everybody needs all that," Miller says. "Each one is individual."

The program was established a few years ago when

the district was made administrator of revegetation funds set aside after one of several water sales back in the 1980s. Several Front Range cities bought water rights in the Colorado Canal, a large ditch that watered most of the irrigated crops in the county. The sales brought millions to the large cattle concern and other water owners that sold, but left between 40,000 and 50,000 acres dried up with nothing showing but weeds and dirt.

Some of the land was replanted in permanent grass, but much of it wasn't. A court battle resulted in the creation of a meager grass seed and water allowance, but it still wasn't enough and many landowners didn't take advantage of the program.

The district and minority shareholders had objected to some of the sales at least partly because the land left behind wouldn't be returned to permanent vegetation. Eventually, the district was given \$40,000 and then \$15,000 more last year. This year, the state soil conservation board allotted another \$12,500 for the project.

It's not enough to fully revegetate the 10,000 or so acres that still need it in Crowley County, Miller says. But it's a start and the district hopes to continue the program.

Participants run the gamut from longtime farmers to city folks who just moved to the county, Miller says. Much of the land from which the water was sold was later marketed in smaller residential tracts.

Interest has stayed strong in the program, which signed up about 10 participants this year.

Miller said revegetating has other benefits beyond just providing pastures. Fields of weeds can be a fire hazard and help spread noxious weeds to other lands in the region. They also don't provide the same wildlife feeding areas that grass does.

SIGNS OF SUCCESS

Miller is pleased with the results so far. Fields planted just two years ago have grass thigh-high.

"It used to be kochia this high," he said of the land, holding his hand a few feet off the ground.

Alvin Carter has revegetated some of his land both ways, with water and without. It's not easy either

way, he says, but having irrigation water sure helps. A 240-acre field he planted in an assortment of grasses about five years ago is thick enough to support a herd of cattle in the summer. He waters it occasionally when the Front Range city that bought his water doesn't need it and gives it back to farmers like him.

While that pasture has grass too dense to shake a stick at, shaking that same stick at the clump of grass in Carter's unirrigated field wouldn't take long at all. Three years after being planted in grass, only individual clumps of grass prosper among the ever-present weeds.

Carter estimates it'll take 10 to 20 years to make the field into a real pasture. He's considering reseeding and even trucking water in to spray across the field to help the seedlings.

Carter mows the weeds in his unirrigated pasture and uses the cattle on his irrigation-started grounds. It's important not to let the cattle onto the new grass too soon, he said.

"You don't want the cattle to get it when it's too young," he said.

Two of the non-farmer participants in the revegetation program are Jean and George Reeves, who have worked to transform a five-acre field of weeds into a respectable pasture.

They were able to water the new grass a few times, but are still having problems because of the dry conditions and the weeds. They planted sorghum first and then seeded the grass into the stubble, says Jean Reeves.

Like many participating in the cost-share program, the Reeveses bought their small holding after the water was sold away. The retirees came back to Crowley County because of their nearby family and decided they wanted to get rid of the weeds and perhaps create a little spot for a horse.

While growing the grass has been difficult at best, Jean says she is still thrilled about the cost-share program that let them get started.

"I think the program's well worth it," she said. "They really did help us a lot."

—Amos is a writer from LaJunta, Colo.