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Conservation partnership in Johnson City pays off for longtime ranching family

Back when Corrie Craig-Furber's great-great-grandfather, William McCarty was ranching just north of Johnson City, native grasses flourished, and springs flowed continually, providing water to people, livestock and wildlife alike. It was a time when many Blanco County families depended on livestock grazing as their only means of income, and naturally occurring wildfires were feared as a threat to their livelihood.

Over the years, repression of fire and overgrazing began to take its toll. Cedar began to encroach on the land, choking out native grasses and leaving the soil underneath the cedar canopy bare and vulnerable to excessive erosion. Seeps and springs began to dry up, and what was once a virtual oasis of tall grasses, forbs and flowing water became an infestation of cedar.

The one thing that hasn't changed on McCarty's old homestead after six generations is the family's determination to maintain its ranching legacy and to treat the land within its capabilities.

Corrie's grandfather, H.D. Crofts, helped pass along McCarty's land stewardship ethic. In his honor, the family affectionately named their land the HD Crofts Ranch.

In the past two years, they have embarked on a rangeland restoration project for their ranch that would make their ancestors proud.

They selectively removed much of the cedar, allowing native grasses to reestablish while maintaining natural shelter belts for deer, turkey and quail. This was accomplished through the U. S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

C.A. Cowsert, NRCS district conservationist, said, "In order to rotate their cattle from pasture to pasture in a manner that facilitates vigorous plant growth, they installed new cross-fencing with the help of the Lower Colorado River Authority's (LCRA) Creekside Conservation Program."

This program is a partnership among LCRA, NRCS and local soil and water conservation districts to help landowners plan and implement conservation practices such as brush management, cross-fencing and alternative water source development. Since 1990, the Creekside Conservation Program and participating landowners have worked together to implement conservation management plans on more than 103,000 acres throughout the Colorado River basin area of LCRA's 10 statutory counties and Lampasas County.

The Creekside Conservation Program operates on a cost-share basis, where the landowner provides at least 50 percent of project costs, and LCRA provides up to 50 percent reimbursement. To help fund this effort, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency awarded LCRA separate grants in 2004 and 2007, passed through the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board, totaling more than \$965,000.

The program received another funding boost in 2009 when the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation formed a conservation alliance with the Wal-Mart Foundation and created the Water for Texas Initiative. This initiative provided an additional \$60,000 to augment the Creekside program.

"Without these partnerships, we wouldn't be able to accomplish our land conservation goals," said Garrett Craig, Corrie's oldest son. "Our family is blessed to have this land, and we intend to pass this blessing on to our children."

For more information on the LCRA Creekside Conservation Program in Blanco County, contact the Pedernales Soil and Water Conservation District at (830) 868-7237, Ext. 3, or Bobby Humphrey, LCRA Natural Resource Conservation coordinator II, at 1-800-776-5272, Ext. 7155.



Corrie Craig/Furber and son, Garrett Craig receive their LCRA "Creekside Conservation Partner" gate sign from Pedernales Soil and Water Conservation District Board Member, Dwayne Hoppe.



Garrett Craig helps put the finishing touches on a new cross fence on the family's HD Crofts Ranch.



LCRA's Rusty Ray (left), surveys the new grass growth with Garrett Craig.

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