NORTH DAKOTA CLIMATE INITIATIVE – SECTOR STORY 8

# Greener Pastures: North Dakota Ranchers Lead the Way in Sustainable Agriculture

North Dakotans know beef is a big deal. There are more than 1.9 million cattle and 18,000 cattle farms and ranches throughout the state. Cattle outnumber people four to one!

As the North Dakota Department of Environmental Quality looks to bolster the state's climate resilience with a first-of-its-kind Sustainability Plan, cattle ranchers are playing an integral role in supporting efforts to naturally sequester emissions while increasing economic growth, and they are reaping the rewards.

The Alliance to Advance Climate-Smart Agriculture is a national pilot program that rewards farmers and ranchers for adopting or maintaining high-value conservation practices. North Dakota was one of four states chosen for the pilot along with Arkansas, Minnesota, and Virginia. The program aims to prove the value of financially rewarding farmers and ranchers for utilizing climate-smart practices by making sure producers receive a reasonable return that exceeds costs and reflects the public value of the stacked environmental benefits.

The North Dakota Farmers Union, the state lead for the pilot program, reports that farmers and ranchers can earn $100 per acre or animal unit when they implement practices that support carbon sequestration, greenhouse gas reduction, improved soil health, water quality, water conservation, and other vital ecosystem services. Seven soil conservation districts in North Dakota are participating in the program. The goal is to enroll 450 producers who are farming or ranching in Billings, Cass, Foster, McKenzie, Mercer, Rolette, Stark, or Ward counties.

Prescribed grazing, feed management, and pasture and hay planting are among the conservation practices North Dakota ranchers have adopted. These practices benefit ranchers and the environment in several significant ways:

- **Improved Herd Health:** Sustainable ranching maintains the forage quality for grazing and ensures livestock receive the proper nutrients, improving their overall health and productivity.

- **Reduced Soil Erosion:** Well-managed pastures protect the soil from erosion and improve soil structure, which supports a healthy ecosystem.
- **Protected Water Quality**: Healthy pastures filter water and reduce dust, yielding better environmental conditions. Feed management prevents excess nutrients in surface and groundwater by reducing the quantity of nitrogen, phosphorus, sulfur, and salts in manure.
- **Protected Air Quality**: Sustainable ranching reduces ammonia, odors, greenhouse gases, volatile organic compounds, and dust.
- **Reduced Waste and Cost**: Conservation practices minimize waste and lower the environmental impact of feed production while reducing feed costs and improving economic sustainability.

**North Dakota ranchers are already reaping financial AND tangible benefits from these practices.**

Bartholomay Kattle Kompany, a 4,000-acre cow-calf operation on the Sheyenne Delta on the edge of the Red River Valley in Sheldon, North Dakota, has been using prescribed grazing techniques to help keep their herds and soil healthy. “We feel that good grazing has helped improve and protect our land,” says ranch co-owner Keith Bartholomay. “We rotational graze but we always rotate with a purpose...Proper rotational grazing by livestock helps the wildlife, helps all the fauna, the bugs, [and] the soils.”

Bartholomay Kattle Kompany has a history of welcoming new conservation practices and ideas and allowing research programs to utilize their lands to advance environmentally friendly farming and ranching techniques. Bartholomay explains that the guiding principle behind their operation is simple, “We take care of the land so that it can take care of us.” In 2023, the farm received numerous awards, including an Environmental Stewardship Award and the Leopold Conservation Award for their sustainable ranching practices.

Ranchers like Bartholomay, who have already adopted sustainability measures, and those new to sustainability are eligible to participate in the Alliance to Advance Climate-Smart Agriculture program. Producers can enroll up to 320 acres or animal units for a maximum payout of $32,000 annually. Producers receive 50% upfront, 25% after implementation and verification, and then the final 25% after reporting is complete.

Cooperation among ranchers and conservation experts has been key to success. The North Dakota Conservation District Employees Association and soil conservation districts provide technical assistance for growers. Additionally, the North Dakota Grain Growers Association has partnered with the North Dakota Farmers Union to support producer outreach.

Ranchers can learn more about the program and the benefits of conservation practices by visiting the Alliance to Advance Climate-Smart Agriculture website or by contacting their local soil conservation district.

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