

COLLABORATION PRESERVES WORKING GRASSLANDS



Unique partners collaborate to showcase environmental benefits of cattle production.

by Abbie Lankitus & Kylee Kohls, *Certified Angus Beef*

Grass and water. These are the essential elements in beef production — the same resources vital to healthy waterfowl populations. Productive agriculture and conservation go hand in hand.

That's why Certified Angus Beef announced a collaboration with Ducks Unlimited at the 2021 Angus Convention in Fort Worth, Texas. Together, the two organizations assembled half a million dollars to launch the Working Grasslands Conservation Initiative, helping unlock an

additional \$2.5 million in grants to fund the initiative's work during the next three years.

Supporting economic and environmental stewardship, this project allows cattlemen to lean on the technical expertise of Ducks Unlimited personnel through voluntary, cost-sharing programs

focused on preserving and restoring grasslands important to cattle ranching, duck populations and our climate in the northern Great Plains.

"Together, we can deploy more voluntary, incentive-based programs that work for the Angus rancher while advancing carbon sequestration, clean water and biodiversity," says Bruce Cobb, executive vice president of production for Certified Angus Beef.

Priority landscapes

The three-year initiative includes financial and technical assistance to interested landowners, notes Billy Gascoigne, director of agriculture and strategic partnerships for Ducks Unlimited.

"This collaborative work rallies around ranchers facing growing challenges while being the stewards of our remaining grasslands and wetlands in some of our most priority landscapes," he says. "We see ranchers trying to keep improving how they produce cattle while remaining economically viable. We want to make sure they have the resources needed and help elevate the critical role of livestock in preserving this critical habitat."

Cobb emphasizes, "Certified



Above: Brothers Justin and Nathan Spickler manage independent Angus seedstock herds in North Dakota's James River Valley. Both have partnered with Ducks Unlimited for grassland preservation.

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Angus Beef is committed to demonstrating the benefits of beef production beyond a great steak. Healthy ecosystems come along as a byproduct of raising the best-tasting beef.”

Firsthand account

Third-generation ranchers from the James River Valley of Glenfield, North Dakota, agree.

Brothers Justin and Nathan Spickler made good use of Ducks Unlimited cost-share programs. Each manages his own Angus seedstock herd and grows forage crops.

“We live in the area where the tall- and short-grass prairies meet,” Justin says. “It’s great grass and very productive, with a wide species variety, so we can raise heavy calves without supplemental feed.”

That makes Spickler pastures a perfect symbiotic habitat for waterfowl and Angus cattle.

Waterfowl nest upland and need grass to procreate, sometimes miles from the nearest water.

Justin linked with Ducks Unlimited in 2017 and Nathan in 2019 on similar projects. They

cost-shared fencing, built water tanks supplied by solar energy, and started grazing cover crops.

“By starting in our rye, we hit native grass about a month later than normal,” Nathan says. “It allowed us to rest our grasses way more than what we could otherwise in the drought.”

Justin appreciates the common ground: “Improvement of rangeland helps us both,” he says. “This is a good relationship — helping people raise Angus beef. It’s a win for both.”

Often called the most endangered ecosystem in North America, the tallgrass prairie offers valuable, resilient carbon storage. One of the best ways to maintain these vital grasslands is through livestock integration on family farms and ranches.

“These lands are more sustainable now and in the future when they are being stewarded by ranchers grazing livestock,” Gascoigne says. “Our conservation staff live in these same communities and are vested in developing programs that meet local needs. We sit down at the kitchen tables with farm families and identify solutions through fencing, water development, cover-crop seeding, soil health evaluations and rotational grazing to make better grass and wetland conditions.”

Grazing the PPR

The Prairie Pothole Region (PPR), which extends far into Canada, stretches in the United States from northwest Montana to central Iowa and hosts more than 4 million ducks in its grass biomes.

Historically, half to as much as 80% of North American waterfowl utilize the PPR to nest and rear their young. This same region has

been important to ruminant animals for centuries — first bison, now cattle.

“We know these grasslands evolved with grazing animals, an important factor in rangeland and soil health,” Gascoigne adds. “Working in this landscape for 85 years, we recognize that proactive work with private owners — farmers and ranchers — lets us achieve a lot more win-wins at a scale important to the sustainability of waterfowl and cattle production.”

It takes a team

Cattlemen often surround themselves with advisors and expertise outside their primary focus, Cobb says.

It creates a team.

“If you have a cattle operation, you have vets, nutritionists, risk managers, bankers and tax accountants,” he notes. “Why not have somebody to help you understand the health of your land?”

The people at Ducks Unlimited understand conservation biology, rangeland health and agronomy.

“We know less about how to drive value back to these ranchers so they can be economically sustainable for generations to come,” Gascoigne says. “The experience of Certified Angus Beef in this realm is what’s so powerful about this work: to have diversity within the sustainability views of economics — environmental, social and cultural.”

Both organizations understand maintaining grasslands requires sustained ranching. The Working Grasslands Conservation Initiative is a unique partnership for a unique time, meeting the call of consumers while supporting family ranchers. |

Editor’s note: Certified Angus Beef is collaborating with Ducks Unlimited to enhance the operations of Angus farmers that protect the lands of the Prairie Pothole Region. Providing breeding grounds for more than 4 million ducks, this land is best under the care of the cows and the cattlemen who care for them. Kylee Kohls is communications manager and Abbie Lankitus is a former communications specialist for Certified Angus Beef.



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