

Jim Pinney gazes over the family ranchstead and a portion of the grasslands on their ranch near Ainsworth. Jim and his father Ron have combined cost-sharing dollars from several agencies with their own funds to improve their rangeland, the wetlands and lakes on that land and, in turn, habitat for wildlife.



Partners



on the range

Ron and Jim Pinney improving their grasslands, wildlife habitat through their own expenditures and funding from several agencies

BY PAT McGRANE

Ainsworth ranchers Ron and Jim Pinney have formed a partnership with a half dozen agencies to improve range production and wildlife habitat.

The father-son team has embarked on an extensive rotational grazing program on their 4,200-acre Sandhills ranch. When they finish the effort over the next 2 to 3 years, they will have divided their rangeland into 28 separate units, or paddocks, from the current eight pastures. To carry this out, they will add 10 new stock wells, 24 steel livestock tanks, more than 5 miles of buried water pipeline, 14 miles of fencing and eight windbreaks.

Rotational grazing isn't a new rangeland practice by any means. However, the Pinneys are taking advantage of what some say is a first-of-its-kind coordinated effort in which the agencies are pooling cost-sharing funds from separate programs for a ranch-wide plan. Ron and his son Jim will pay a portion of the overall costs themselves, about 25%, with the agencies picking up the rest.

Two agencies joining this project early on were the U.S.

Ron Pinney, in the foreground, and Jim Pinney help Mike Hanna, Natural Resources Conservation Service soil conservationist in Brown County, measure a section of pipe that takes water from this windmill to a stock tank. The rotational grazing program, when completed in 2 to 3 years, will involve 28 separate grazing paddocks on 4,200 acres, 10 new stock wells, 24 steel livestock tanks, and more than 5 miles of buried water pipeline.

and Wildlife Service, with its Partners for Wildlife program, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Other partners and some of the programs used by them are: The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (habitat stamp funds), the Upper Loup Natural Resources District (Nebraska Soil and Water Conservation Fund), USDA Farm Service Agency (long-term agreements) and the U.S. Forest Service (Stewardship Incentive Program). Pheasants Forever and Ducks Unlimited also helped financially, as did the NPPD (the Nebraska Public Power District), with some funds for solar panels that power water pumps.

Of particular interest to the Fish and Wildlife Service were the 1,200 acres of lakes, marshes and sub-irrigated meadows in this ranching operation.

"Through our Partners for Wildlife program, the Pinney ranch is our first Nebraska effort to extend wildlife benefits over the entire ranch rather than one range site," says Gene Mack, Sandhills coordinator for the FWS, based in Kearney. "Ron agreed to graze three pastures that include the lakes for only 2 weeks per year, but that grazing period can be anytime that fits his rotation. This will allow him more options in managing the grazing land.

"The Pinney ranch is unique in that it has a lot of water and contains the headwaters of the Calamus River," Mack says. "It has a high diversity of wildlife."

The senior Pinney has managed the ranch since 1970 and is now buying it.

From the economic side, the Pinneys believe they eventually will be able to increase carrying capacity by 382 animal-unit-months (AUMs), from the current 2,130 AUMs. An AUM is the average amount of forage required by a mature cow and calf for 30 days.

Referring to the range remodeling project when completed, particularly the 28 paddocks, Jim says, "We will actually be conserving grass, since the cattle will be forced to eat all the grasses and not just the ones they like.

"This ranch must first support our families," says the elder Pinney. "If we can do that and live in better harmony with the natural resources, then I'm for it." (Jim and his family live on the ranch, while Ron and his wife live in Wood Lake.)

In 1993, the Pinneys decided to plant new windbreaks around calving areas and to renovate windbreaks around the ranchstead. They were interested in not only protection for cattle in winter, but also in wind erosion protection and in the aesthetics the trees would provide. In their discussions with the NRCS staff in Ainsworth, they learned of the other options, including the Partners for Wildlife program. NRCS served as the "middle man," so to speak, between the ranchers and the agencies.

"This is a new twist in the way the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission has partnered with Sandhills ranchers," says Greg Wingfield of the agency's wildlife division. "We commonly share costs of wildlife projects with landowners but it's usually on more site-specific projects, like improving a wetland or converting marginal cropland to native grasses. By applying our dollars to fence, wells and other improvements that enable the Pinneys to implement this grazing system, we'll be improving wildlife and realizing wildlife benefits throughout the ranch."

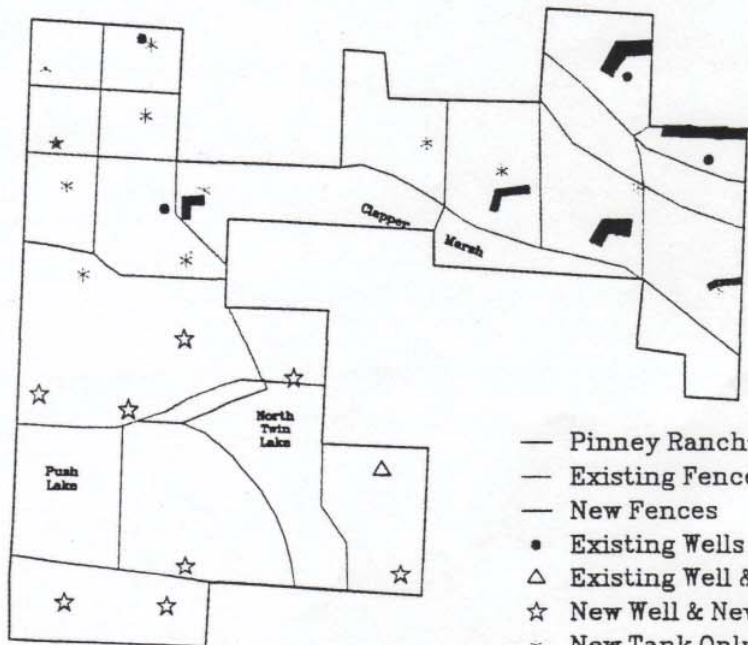
Mike Hanna, NRCS soil conservationist in Ainsworth, says the investment by the Pinneys won't be insignificant. "The return on their investment will come back over several years."

The Pinneys, who raise club calves, a purebred Angus herd and a commercial herd of spring and fall calves, are eager to see the finished product. "It just takes time to get all the fences and wells installed," says Jim. "We will be making this a more efficient ranch, using lessons from the past and current technology."

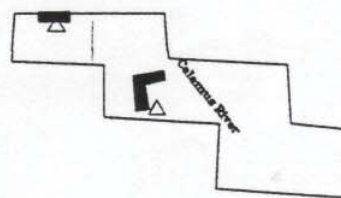
The changes will convert the ranch from a "winter" ranch to a year-round ranch and reduce the amount of land they need to lease. Under the concept of a "winter" ranch, a rancher leases most of his summer pasture and lets the grass grow on the home ranch, Hanna says. Then, in winter or near calving time, he brings the herd home where the grass acts as a standing hay crop.

The Pinneys figure that, with the improvements, they can cut back on the amount of land they lease. ❖

Pat McGrane is public information officer for the state Natural Resources Conservation Service office, Lincoln.



This is how the rotational grazing system will look at the Pinney Ranch, with its 28 paddocks over two ranching units.



0 1 STATUTE MILES