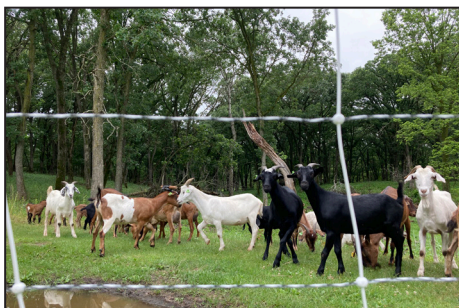




# Managing land with livestock, ecological restoration in mind



**Over three generations, one family's work with Willmar-based NRCS staff has grown to incorporate cattle, grazing goats in land management**

**N**EW LONDON — Frank Gustafson spent six summers during college and law school with a chainsaw, a skid loader and a brush cutter, removing invasive buckthorn from 100 acres of oak savanna.

The work is part of a larger-scale ecological restoration he's pursuing

with assistance from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Gustafson is a third-generation attorney-by-day, farmer-by-night, and the third generation to work with Willmar-based NRCS staff.

"They're all about learning and making improvements to the land," NRCS

**VIDEO:**  
["Managing Land With Livestock"](#)  
features scenes from a July 2025 visit.

**Top:** Ann Gustafson and her son, Frank Gustafson, at right, led a tour of the Kandiyohi County property where they have introduced goats, **left**, and cattle, **right**, as part of a land management effort. The Gustafsons have worked with, counter-clockwise from front, Willmar-based NRCS Customer Service Team Lead Melanie Dickman, NRCS District Conservationist Will Lee and Kandiyohi SWCD technician Ellie Faber. **Center:** Whorled milkweed is among the native species that have appeared on the Kandiyohi County property, where Frank Gustafson has documented 145 species of plants and grasses. **Photo Credits:** Ann Wessel, BWSR



Customer Service Team Lead Melanie Dickman said of the family. “I think the older generation, Wally, was very interested in leaving a legacy for his children and grandchildren.”

That legacy began in 1972 when Wally Gustafson, the son of a Swedish emigrant who grew up on a farm near Olivia, bought land in Kandiyohi County’s glacial hills.

“He was a consummate conservationist in the truest sense of the word,” Frank Gustafson said. “The land comes first, and if he could leave it ... better than he found it, it was a (worthwhile) effort.”

Wally enrolled land in the federal Conservation Reserve Program in 1997. Dickman worked with him on Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) contracts, starting in 2012.

After he died, Dickman worked with his daughter Ann Gustafson to complete a CSP contract for native plant seedlings, and then on an Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) supported rotational grazing setup and pollinator habitat establishment. Now, NRCS District Conservationist Will Lee is working with her son Frank on EQIP-supported forestry and brush management practices — including buckthorn removal, forest-stand improvement and understory seeding centered on the oak savanna.

“I think if you have the opportunity to (own land), you ought to try and leave it better than you found it,” Frank Gustafson said. Years earlier, he had seen how clearing the cedar-choked valleys brought new bird



Lee, left, visited with Frank Gustafson and Ann Gustafson about their ongoing conservation work July 21, 2025, on the Kandiyohi County site.



“Working with the NRCS has been great. I don’t have an agriculture background, and it’s been very helpful to have some of those plans and technical specifications.”

— Frank Gustafson, third-generation attorney

species and a flush of native plants. “That kind of set the hook.”

The ecosystem restoration Frank Gustafson envisions extends to the adjacent pasturelands, small lake and woodlands.

“As the generations have gone on, they continue to get more and more invested in their land and conservation,” Lee said. The forestry work — including forest-stand inventories and work with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) — grew out of on-site discussions about starting a herd of beef cattle. “They’re always looking for something new that they can do.”

When she was looking into buckthorn removal, Ann Gustafson contacted Brett L. Anderson, a Hutchinson-based DNR cooperative

forest manager. Those conversations in 2020 led to the mechanical, manual and chemical removal methods supported by the DNR’s forestry cost-share program for private landowners.

“My primary job is to just help landowners accomplish their objectives with their woodlands,” Anderson said. “But whenever I meet with a landowner, we open the conversation up to ... ‘What’s your bigger objective? What do you want this to look like?’”

In his role as a technical field agent, Anderson wrote the project plans for the brush management and forest-stand improvement work that was supported by EQIP. Based on their condition, species and density, he recommended which trees to remove. And he recommended what species

## NRCS Assistance:

The Gustafsons have received NRCS assistance for projects and practices related to agriculture, wildlife and forestry.

**AGRICULTURE:** Integrated pest management, prescribed grazing management to protect surface or groundwater from nutrients, installing a livestock watering facility and pipeline, seeding native grasses or legumes, incorporating wildlife-friendly fencing, establishing monarch butterfly habitat

**WILDLIFE & FORESTRY:** Brush management, tree/shrub establishment, forest-stand improvement (includes leaving dead trees for cavity-nesters), woody residue treatment, establishing conservation cover, incorporating structures for wildlife (brush piles)

to plant for a healthier, more resilient forest.

Now, a herd of about 30 rotationally grazed goats keeps buckthorn seedlings at bay within the oak savanna. Elsewhere on the 270-acre property, a growing herd of red Devons and black Angus crosses ushers in a diverse array of plants and insects, and the songbirds and other wildlife that follow.

Conventional livestock producers typically manage the land for the animals. The Gustafsons are taking a different approach.

“They’re managing the plant and forage species, and using livestock to do that,” Lee said. “That element of coming from a plant-health, forage-health standpoint, and then using livestock to achieve those ends — seeing it from that lens I think really can help with conservation



*With the growing herd of red Devons and black Angus crosses came a diverse array of plants and insects, followed by songbirds and other wildlife.*

practices and what they're trying to do. ... But having that paradigm shift is key, and they've really taken that to heart."

While the goats are meant to be a shorter-term buckthorn management tool, Ann Gustafson said the cattle are meant to provide income through the sale of grass-fed beef and seed stock.

Wally Gustafson had raised Scottish Highland and polled Hereford cattle, but neither Ann nor Frank had experience managing a herd.

"Melanie was instrumental in pointing us in the right direction of other like-minded farmers with experience in the area," Ann Gustafson said. "We started with them custom-grazing their cattle out here. So we learned a lot from them."

Pheasants Forever grazing specialist Brady Blasher provided technical assistance when the Gustafsons added goats to their grazing plan — they settled on targeted grazing with temporary fencing — and when they started to manage the pasture on their own.

The pasture is now divided into paddocks. The addition of warm-season natives made quality forage available after midsummer and expanded

## Ag water quality certification leads to more conservation opportunities

NRCS Customer Service Team Lead Melanie Dickman connected Ann Gustafson and Frank Gustafson with Ellie Faber, the Kandiyohi Soil & Water Conservation District technician who works with landowners who apply for the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP).

"With NRCS, we always try to help the producer. There were things that they really wanted to incorporate, like the goat grazing," Dickman said.

MAWQCP certification unlocks other funding opportunities. In this case, Faber helped with the plan and funding related to buckthorn removal — including a more powerful electric fence energizer, portable poly-net goat fencing and seed for the understory. The Gustafsons became MAWQCP-certified in 2021.

an already diverse mix of species. Maintaining forage of different heights allows some plants to flower and provides different types of habitat.



**Dickman**



**Faber**

"It's pretty cool to see a family so passionate about their own property and natural resources and sustainable agriculture," Faber said.

Ann Gustafson said the assistance

made it possible to pursue the buckthorn removal, and to install the fencing and water line.

"None of this would be possible without leadership from Melanie, and then also Will (NRCS District Conservationist Will Lee), and Ellie," Ann Gustafson said. "We really needed that financial boost to be able to do what we've done."

"It's really just creating that mosaic landscape," Blasher said. It's the sort of landscape once shaped by grazing bison. "There

would be areas that were never grazed, and then there would be areas that were heavily grazed, providing adequate rest and recovery, (which affected not only) vegetation, productivity and health, but also the wide diversity of those plants and habitat types."

Throughout the property, Frank Gustafson has documented 145 species of plants and grasses. Some of them, like whorled milkweed, popped up on their own. Big-picture management goals to conduct prescribed burns and rotationally graze cattle across the entire property would likely result in more volunteer species.

"Conservation is very important to me. But it doesn't have to be an either/or," Frank Gustafson said. "You can have really sound management practices and increase biodiversity, water infiltration and wildlife habitat while also improving the quality and amount of forage for livestock."



Natural Resources Conservation Service

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