

Third-generation conservationist focuses on ecological restoration



Minnesota NRCS
website: www.mn.nrcs.usda.gov

NRCS ASSISTANCE INCLUDED:

AG: Integrated pest management, prescribed grazing management, livestock watering facility and pipeline, native grasses/legumes seeding, wildlife-friendly fencing, monarch butterfly habitat establishment

WILDLIFE & FORESTRY: Brush management, tree/shrub establishment, forest-stand improvement, woody residue treatment, conservation cover establishment, incorporating structures for wildlife

NEW 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 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."



Dickman

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



"I think if you have the opportunity to (own land), you ought to try and leave it better than you found it."

— Frank Gustafson, on conservation

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 seedings, 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,

Ann Gustafson and her son, Frank Gustafson, have introduced goats, left, and cattle, right, as part of a land management effort. 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.

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

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 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?'"



Willmar-based NRCS District Conservationist Will Lee, center, visited with Frank Gustafson and Ann Gustafson about their ongoing conservation work on the Kandiyohi County property they are managing with ecological restoration in mind.

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 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 usher 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



Lee

lens I think really can help with conservation 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 an already diverse mix of species. Maintaining forage of different heights allows some plants to flower and provides different types of habitat.

"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, which include conducting prescribed burns and rotationally grazing 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."

BWSR staff members write and produce Snapshots, a monthly newsletter highlighting the work of the agency and its partners.