

Bankers Award winner a ‘happy’ farmer

By Pat Schiefen
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Farmer Melvin Nemechek talks about farming with a twinkle in his eye. He and his wife, Shannon, are the winners of the Bankers Award. He says that he has always farmed or done chores on the farm since he can remember and he wouldn't change a thing.

"Mother Nature is the farmer's biggest problem," said Melvin. "Farming is my livelihood and my hobby and I plan to go until I drop dead."

He said the drought has made the farmers change to no-till and minimum till. He grows irrigated and dryland wheat, corn and sorghum and has grown oil and confectionary sunflowers, milo and millet. "I do try to raise what can lose the most money," he said. "Every year is different and you always have to have a backup plan."

"Dryland corn, wheat and milo depends on nature," he said. Chemical fallow helps keep the soil in place while controlling the weeds, he said.

"Every farmer needs a conserva-

tion plan," he said. "Our ground is going to only yield so much and you can't afford to deplete the soil."

The new varieties of crops have helped, he said. "You vary the wheat for the different soil types."

When irrigating he uses strip tilling with 30 inch spacing. "Every year the row where you plant and where you don't changes," he said.

"We are fortunate to have the services we have for the farming community," Melvin said. "I wouldn't be a farmer if we didn't have the services."

"Marketing is a challenge," he said. "The commodities fluctuate so fast."

Shannon is very helpful with the management, Melvin said.

"I don't drive tractors," Shannon added.

Shannon's parents are LaVonne and the late Everett Lage and she graduated from Goodland High School in 1981. The couple were married in 2003 and have a son,



Melvin Nemechek looks at his plow that runs 30 inches between rows when he plants crops. Nemechek said he tried to match varieties of crops to the soil types.
Photo by Pat Schiefen/The Goodland Star-News

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Prescribed burns help develop good grasslands

By David J. Kraft
State Rangeland Management Specialist
As common as the smell of a spring rain, is the sight and smell of a prescribed burn, signaling the entry of spring and a new growing season in the Great Plains.

Without a doubt, fire has played an integral part in the development of native grasslands, throughout the central United States. As native grass acres continue to decrease through time, prescribed burning activities and the use of fire remains as important today as a maintenance tool, equal to or greater than times past.

Fire has many purposes and reasons for use even though differing opinions for the use of fire exist. There are very few who would not agree that if these once vast prairies are to persist, fire will need to be a part of their management.

To understand the present need for fire it is important to know the past. As European, early American, and post-Columbian development or occupation spread from the East to the West Coast, it was well noted that fire was prevalent and commonly witnessed. Some of the fires were certainly caused by natural events, but some were no doubt started with a purpose.

One important detail to understand is the dif-

ference from an impact point of view, between a natural fire and prescribed fire. Many natural fires occurred in the past when climatic conditions allowed for the ignition and spread of fire. Without a doubt the results, stemming from an uncontrolled or natural fire environment, were capable of being more environmentally impactful at least from a vegetation standpoint. These fires still occur today but are more of a result of fire-starved plant communities saturated with fuels of a volatile nature.

From a planned- or prescribed-fire point of view, acres to be burned, fuel, and conditions in which the fire is to be conducted are planned with an objective in mind. Safety is an extremely vital part of the burn prescription, which many times prevents natural or reclamation impacts at the plant community level. This is not a knock on prescribed burn planning, but a reality of an ever changing burn culture and climate.

Within the state of Kansas both fire-starved and fire-frequency rich plant communities exist. Producers ultimately decide the objective for which fire is used. Depending upon the identified objective, producers or land managers will and have dictated the timing, frequency, and extent for which fire is used.

Again it is important to re-identify that most points of view agree that fire is needed. Within that agreement or common ground, there exist differing ideas of frequency, timing, and resulting impacts.

To minimize the differing points of view it is extremely important for prescribed burn users to properly identify their objectives and plan their burn accordingly. It is also important to understand that by just making the earth black, not all objectives will be met.

Commonly identified prescribed burn objectives range from improved animal performance, grazing distribution problems, invasive woody species, fuel loading or extensive fuel loads, to wildlife habitat management. Within each one of those objectives is the understanding that in order to maintain a native plant community which is either, comparable to a historic climax plant community or an image of it, fire is a necessity. Each objective will most likely contain different prescriptions in that timing, frequency, and fuel loads may vary.

One thing is certain, the landscape in which prescribed burning or fire is used, is ever changing. Within the changing landscape is more fragmented grassland. New homes, developments,

and an increasing public presence now make it more difficult to use prescribed burning.

Another reality on the horizon is the impact that prescribed burning has been identified as having on air quality. Pro-active responses from the prescribed burning community will be necessary as the protection or the use of prescribed burning is debated.

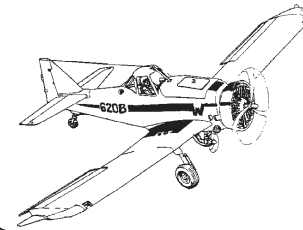
Common ground will most likely need to be focused on, which enhances both understanding and the needs of a resource or plant community under threat.

What will prescribed burning activities look like in the future? One can only guess. It would be my hope the smell of native grass fires will exist from a land management standpoint into the future. With the absence of this long-used tool, the once vast native grasslands of the central United States will fail to survive.

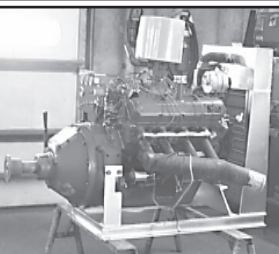
For more information about prescribed burning, please contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office or conservation district office located at 210 W. 10th, Goodland. To learn more about NRCS, visit the Web site at www.ks.nrcs.usda.gov.

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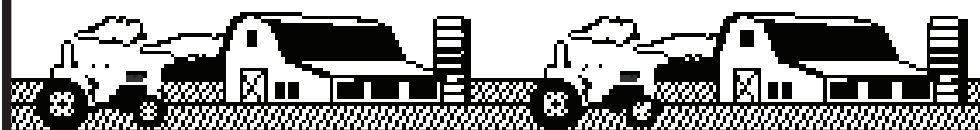
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