

CONSERVATION Showcase

Fire Returns to Awesome Ranch



Before and after
brush control

It is a joy to cruise down I-25 in New Mexico in the fall, with chamisa and rolling hillsides delighting the eye. But roads less traveled offer an even bigger visual feast when you come upon some of the fabulous ranches that have taken conservation to heart, and are tucked away in New Mexico's byways. The Canon Bonita Ranch, near Wagon Mound, is a case in point.

When Mike Reardon took over the operations of the family ranch, like so many others he saw beauty in the greenery of the many pinons and junipers that covered the countryside in his area. Wanting the best for the bit of paradise he now managed, he began work with the

Mora Field Office for the Natural Resources Conservation Service and set out on a voyage of discovery.

Reardon's journey ultimately led him to an understanding about how fire is an essential ingredient in brush management, and that the ranch had in years past hosted a bountiful prairie that supported large herds of deer, turkeys, and other wildlife.

His love for the land made Reardon roll up his sleeves and begin the process of grassland restoration, and the return of fire to the equation of his environment. He now has established a cycle where he brings fire to the land to clear the pinon and juniper that are robbing the landscape of water and choking out the forage that is essential to a healthy prairie. By using prescribed burns on a cycle of about every seven years he is following the natural course of events that probably occurred during pre-settlement times.

Reardon doesn't rely on fire alone. With a bobcat and front-end loader he pushes over much of the invasive brush and trees, and piles them in preparation for the prescribed burns. He rehabilitates the spots where brush piles are burned, and is planting native species that attract and support wildlife.

He currently is involved in a streambed restoration project to bring back the wetlands that once had existed in the canyon floor.

As a result of his work, the Reardon ranch is now hosting ten times the mule deer it has in the past, wild turkeys, elk, and numerous bird species. Cattle are part of the mix in managing the land.

Awesome is the word that applies to ranches like the one Reardon has managed. Its incredible beauty touches the heart of those who see it, and is to the credit of dedicated conservationists like Mike Reardon.

For more information about brush management and prescribed burns contact NRCS at (505)761-4400 or go to www.nm.nrcs.usda.gov