



Mixed and shortgrass prairie on the Smoky Valley Ranch changes color in the fall. Chalky outcroppings in the soil prevented the conversion to row crop agriculture. (Photo by Erin Socha for Kansas Reflector)



The Nature Conservancy raises both cattle and bison at Smoky Valley Ranch in western Kansas. TNC transfers some surplus bison to tribal nations for restoration and stewardship. (Photo by Erin Socha for Kansas Reflector)

Smoky Valley Ranch provides exportable conservation model for Kansas cattle ranchers

By: Erin Socha
Kansas Reflector
December 31, 2025

LOGAN COUNTY — Smoky Valley Ranch in western Kansas, about 40 minutes south of Colby, experienced one of the driest years on record in 2022.

The almost 20,000-acre cattle and bison ranch recorded just six and a half inches of rain, barely half of the yearly averages recorded during the Dust Bowl era.

“I had never seen this place look so brown and crispy,” said ranch manager Justin Roemer. “If you even looked at the grass, it just, poof, disintegrated.”

The region has always been dry, and it’s getting drier.

“Every rancher out here keeps precipitation logs like it’s their job, because everything they do depends on the water,” Roemer said.

Historical averages for the region are a scant 18-20 inches per year, but recent years, he said, have been averaging just 16.

“We plan for drought,” he said. “If we’re not prepared for that to happen, then that’s when it can either make us go bottom up, or we start going backwards on our habitat goals.”

Smoky Valley Ranch is owned by the Nature Conservancy, which purchased the property in 1999 and has added parcels over the years to bring its contiguous footprint to its current size. A remarkable 80% of the ranch is native, unplowed grassland, straddling the transition zone between mixed and shortgrass prairie. The ranch is home to lesser prairie chickens, pronghorn antelope, and black-footed ferrets, a critically endangered species once thought to be extinct. The Nature Conservancy provides custom grazing leases to cattle ranchers in the region.

Grazing leases are common in the cattle industry. Ranchers will rent a plot of land on which to raise their herds before

sending them to market. Smoky Valley Ranch manages the herd for the ranchers, providing daily care, fencing, forage and water.

While other ranchers often manage their land to achieve their cattle production goals, Smoky Valley Ranch brings in cattle to support the prairie ecosystem.

“For us, the only purpose for our cattle on the ranch is to be our large grazer,” Roemer said. “They’re out there achieving our habitat goals. They are the ones that are manipulating the land.”

Grazing, fire and drought are the main drivers for land management, he said.

“Drought, which is the one that we can’t control, is probably the hardest, the best, the biggest driver of everything out here.”

It can be difficult to imagine eastern red cedar trees transforming the vast, treeless and arid landscapes of western Kansas, but Jesse Nippert, a distinguished professor of biology at Kansas State University who studies woody encroachment, said it’s only a matter of time.

“It might not be a problem now, but it will be a problem in the future,” Nippert said. “Woody plants have no problem growing out around Hoxie, Colby, Goodland, all those locations. They could not grow there 75 years ago, and they’re growing out there now passively.”

Increased atmospheric carbon, he said, is making the sturdy trees even more drought tolerant.

Eastern red cedar is the primary choice for shelterbelts, dense rows of trees strategically planted to shield against the harsh winds of the region. Its seeds are dispersed by birds, which can introduce the species far from where it’s grown, Nippert said.

Ranchers and conservationists agree that the best way to prevent cedar encroachment is to keep native grasslands intact and burn on an appropri-

ate schedule. For Smoky Valley Ranch, portions of the ranch are burned yearly. The entire ranch is burned on a 10-year schedule.

One of the biggest values of the work Roemer and the Nature Conservancy is doing, he said, is that it can be exported to other ranchers. The Nature Conservancy helps other ranchers develop grazing plans and hosts the Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition’s shortgrass range academy every year.

“We have to have those cattle on this ranch showing ‘this is what we’re doing with them, and here’s the results we’re getting. You can do this too,’” he said. “And I think that’s just so invaluable to have that opportunity.”

It is difficult to quantify exactly how much regenerative practices such as fire and rotational grazing are catching on. Management with prescribed fire has been increasing throughout the Great Plains, and Kansas now has 16 regional prescribed burn associations.

One metric that has seen rapid growth is a new labeling system, CARE certified, which lets beef consumers know the product they are purchasing was produced on ranches that practice regenerative grazing.

“CARE certified is a suite of standards,” said Lora Wright, director of sustainable animal proteins and technical services for Where Food Comes From, the company that audits producers who receive the label.

The four pillars of those standards are animal care, land stewardship, fair working conditions, and traceability. To receive the label, all facilities, from ranch to processing, must be vetted according to these standards, which were developed in collaboration with the Nature Conservancy.

Enrollment has grown almost 400% in less than five years — from 374 ranches and almost 315,000 cattle in 2020 to

almost 1,300 ranches and more than a million head of cattle, on more than 42 million acres of rangeland, in 2024. Wright said she expects to see similar growth in the 2025 numbers, and that growth in Kansas has been strong.

“Producers in the state of Kansas are just as progressive as the others trying to preserve their lands,” Wright said. “With that is the biodiversity of wildlife and other things. Water is a big deal in western Kansas, and grazing management plans can help maintain all those natural resources.”

Where Food Comes From has partnered with retailers such as Walmart to get the products on shelves across the country. Consumers, Wright said, want to feel good about the beef they’re eating.

Conservation-minded ranchers, such as those profiled for this series, are working to protect what native grasslands remain across the state. But the rapid advance of woody encroachment is compounding existing threats, such as urbanization and invasive species. And ranchers can’t manage for the increasing atmospheric carbon dioxide that is fueling woody plant growth, Nippert said.

Woody encroachment might seem inevitable, he said, but he sees reason to keep fighting back.

“This is our heritage, being a grassland state,” he said. “It’s our heritage as humans, akin to a location. And for that reason alone, I feel like I have an obligation to persist, to protect the places that we can protect, to find goals for recovery, for the places that we can recover, and then to find meaningful ecosystem services that we can derive out of the places that we likely can’t recover.”

Some places, he said, are never coming back.

But, he said, “We have an ethical responsibility to do what we can do, to push back.”

Legal Notice

(First Published in Lincoln Sentinel-Republican on Wednesday, January 21, 2026)

City of Lincoln Center, Kansas

FINANCIAL REPORT

| Funds | Balance Forward | Receipts | Withdrawals | Balance |
|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| General Operating | \$863,295.31 | \$321,529.06 | \$211,609.20 | \$973,215.17 |
| Water Utility | \$398,344.81 | \$77,006.34 | \$98,259.25 | \$377,091.90 |
| Electric Utility | \$3,498,745.00 | \$469,250.81 | \$929,354.96 | \$3,038,640.85 |
| Sewer Utility | \$581,773.11 | \$59,742.23 | \$56,198.44 | \$585,316.90 |
| Special Liability | \$68,643.46 | \$0.00 | \$0.00 | \$68,643.46 |
| G.O. Bond & Interest | \$45,341.91 | \$166.75 | \$0.00 | \$45,508.66 |
| Library | \$8,611.77 | \$1,025.80 | \$9,637.57 | \$0.00 |
| Special Highway | \$111,748.35 | \$8,286.95 | \$1,607.75 | \$118,427.55 |
| Equipment Reserve Fund | \$284,659.02 | \$46,033.65 | \$0.00 | \$330,692.67 |
| Employee Benefits | \$48,447.08 | \$1,165.53 | \$8,258.46 | \$41,354.15 |
| Payroll Withholding | \$2,415.22 | \$9,596.15 | \$5,826.04 | \$6,185.33 |
| Sp. Park & Recreation | \$25,204.08 | \$938.70 | \$0.00 | \$26,142.78 |
| Solid Waste Service | \$14,155.41 | \$29,875.15 | \$31,900.64 | \$12,129.92 |
| Cemetery Trust | \$77,353.73 | \$504.00 | \$780.00 | \$77,077.73 |
| Recreation Fund | \$145,766.68 | \$1,978.80 | \$5,721.87 | \$142,023.61 |
| Water Reserve | \$76,161.53 | \$30,000.00 | \$0.00 | \$106,161.53 |
| Light Reserve | \$650,000.00 | \$150,000.00 | \$0.00 | \$800,000.00 |
| Sewer Reserve | \$105,000.00 | \$15,000.00 | \$0.00 | \$120,000.00 |
| Project Fund | \$0.00 | \$0.00 | \$0.00 | \$0.00 |
| Covid-19 Fed Funds | \$0.00 | \$0.00 | \$0.00 | \$0.00 |
| Base Grant Project | \$0.00 | \$0.00 | \$0.00 | \$0.00 |
| TOTALS | \$7,005,666.47 | \$1,222,099.92 | \$1,359,154.18 | \$6,868,612.21 |

The Airport, Band, Cemetery, Defense, Swimming Pool Operation, and Tennis Court Maintenance Funds are carried as sub-accounts in the General Operating Fund.

| Balance on Deposit: | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| Citizens State Bank: | \$3,761,218.85 |
| Bank of Tescott: | \$3,190,955.59 |
| Petty Cash: | \$500.00 |
| TOTAL | \$6,952,674.44 |
| Outstanding Warrants: | \$84,062.23 |
| Net Balance on Deposit: | \$6,868,612.21 |

CITY DEBT

| | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| General Obligation Bond, Series 2017 | \$314,000.00 |
| Kansas Public Water Supply Loan Fund | \$956,618.67 |
| TOTAL | \$1,270,618.67 |

INVESTMENTS OWNED BY CITY

| | |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Citizens State Bank - NOW | \$38,236.42 |
| Citizens State Bank - Savings & CD | \$3,722,982.43 |
| Bank of Tescott - NOW | \$205,803.10 |
| Bank of Tescott - Savings & CD | \$2,985,152.49 |
| TOTAL | \$6,952,174.44 |

(Included in Net Deposit)

I, Kimberly Meyer, Treasurer, do hereby certify that the Above Statement is Correct. Signed: Kimberly Meyer, Title: Treasurer, Subscribed and Sworn Before Me this 14 day of January, 2026. My Commission Expires 1879 day of 11/11/2026. City Clerk

Legal Notice

(First Published in Lincoln Sentinel-Republican on Wednesday, January 14, 2025)

Appendix 4-B: Notice of Annual Meeting (for the election of two supervisors)

NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING OF THE

LINCOLN COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT

To all qualified electors residing within the boundaries of the LINCOLN County Conservation District, notice is hereby given that pursuant to K.S.A. 2-1907, as amended, on the 7th day of February, 2026, at 6:00 a.m. p.m., an annual meeting of the LINCOLN County Conservation District will be held at the Lincoln Jr/Sr High School Commons Area 701 East North Street Lincoln KS

The meeting agenda shall include the following business items:

ONE:

The supervisors of the LINCOLN County Conservation District shall make full and due report of their activities and financial affairs since the last annual meeting.

TWO:

The supervisors shall conduct an election by secret ballot of qualified electors there present, of two supervisors to serve for a term of three years from date of said meeting.

The terms of Brady Coover and Morgan Nitsch are expiring.

All in the county of LINCOLN in the State of Kansas.

By [Signature] Chairperson

LINCOLN County Conservation District

Attest [Signature] District Secretary / Manager

Send your stories, news and information to:

lincolnksnews@gmail.com