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Conservation Speech Contest 2012

"75 years in conservation, what's next?"

A farmer, who has been farming his 320 acre patch of land for decades, has come to the conclusion that he may need to switch his operation. All of his farming equipment is old, needs replaced and is not doing the job economically. Thinking over all of the equipment he needs, he will spend at least 300,000-500,000 dollars. He wants to become more environmentally friendly, so he wants the best equipment available. He is going to need a large loan because annually his land only profits him around 50,000 dollars. Is it worth it for him to borrow and then spend mass amounts of money to achieve maximum productivity on his land, or is it time that he switches his operation to something new?

A family of four is tired of the big city life; they want to leave it all behind. Dad's a doctor, Mom's a banker, and the kids have only been exposed to the suburban life. They load up, head out of New York and find a small farm in the Dakotas, but being from the city they have no idea what to do on a farm, how to do it, and do it in the most ecologically friendly way. Who can help?

A wildlife hunter and his wife, a recreation enthusiast, move to the Dakota's from California, and buy a farm. They desire to make enough income to make their

land payment and pay their property taxes. What can they do that will not cost too much to get started?

These three examples are all looking for the same solution.

The Prairie Farm can be a model for all of these scenarios and other producers, along with consumers, for alternative ways of making a healthy living off of the prairie lands.

The EcoSun Prairie Farm is one of the first of its kind. Located near Brookings South Dakota, it is mainly intended to apply agricultural and ecological sustainability. The chunk of prairie land is small in size but big in quality, a cool 640 acres of tall prairie grasses and CRP pasture. It has become what it is today over a stretch of five years, beginning in 2008. The main focus of the farm is to restore the natural grasslands and wet meadows once found all over the Dakotas.

Within this operation there are many possibilities for income. The Farm marketed 500 tons of prairie hay, 13,000 pounds of Switch Grass seed, and hundreds of pounds of grass fed beef in 2011. These products are in high demand for niche markets.

Through conservation practices the Prairie Farm's restored grasslands are producing many ecosystem goods and services, such as carbon storage in soil, clean water, and animals like, meadow larks, dragon flies, chorus frogs, and tiger salamanders.

People desiring to model the farm's practices are very diverse. Some are farmers wanting to escape the constant climb of input prices, heavy reliance on chemicals, or roller-coaster crop prices. Others are non-traditional farmers, the class that seems to be growing tremendously.

This is the start of something big, something that will soon be around the globe, starting from a small farm in rural South Dakota.

Another example of farming ingenuity on my side of the state, western South Dakota, is an operation called Wild Idea Buffalo Company. The mission of Wild Idea is to bring back the natural habitat and majestic buffalo and other species to the prairie. By caring for the land and giving the buffalo room to roam the prairie is nurtured back to health. Grasses, forbs, and flowers flourish providing a sustainable ecosystem for all creatures great and small. The buffalo used in this process are all 100% grass fed animals, living off the land as their ancestors did, with no antibiotics, or hormones. The animals are humanely harvested, using a unique, modern process. The main benefit from this operation is selling a healthy, lean product that is in high demand.

Both the EcoSun Prairie Farm and Wild Idea Buffalo Company use conservation practices that have developed over decades of study. These studies began in response to the Dust Bowl of the 1930's. Over 75 years ago in 1935 Congress established the Soil Conservation Service, now known as the NRCS (Natural Resource Conservation Service). It was the beginning of a federal

commitment of conserving natural resources on private lands. Conservation practices vary from region to region and even farm to farm, and have evolved over the years. The main focus for the EcoSun Prairie Farm and Wild Idea Buffalo Company centers on the ideas of programs like the Conservation Reserve Program. These two operations give us a glimpse of the future of conservation.

Conservation has been a part of South Dakota and many other regions across the world for many years. Save today, conserve for tomorrow... seventy five years in conservation, seventy five more years to come.