

Where the Ostriches and Buffalo Roam

Michael Herren, Kampsville, Illinois

Establishment of Native Warm and Cool Season Grasses on Highly Erodible Land

Coordinator: Michael and Debi Herren

Location: Kampsville, Illinois

SARE Grant: \$2,951

Grant Year: 1994

Project Number: FNC92-022

Michael and Debi Herren raised eyebrows when they started raising buffalo, ostriches, and mountain elk. They also found success with four native, warm-season grasses for the buffalo to graze on: big bluestem, Indiangrass, eastern gamagrass, and switchgrass.

When Michael and Debi Herren started raising buffalo, ostriches, and Rocky Mountain elk in 1986, "Everybody was sure we were nuts," says Michael Herren. "But they and I couldn't really understand the value of the buffalo at the time. We did things for the love of it, not for the money."

Herren stuck with his gut, purchasing six buffalo for his 320-acre farm in Kampsville, Illinois—a herd that grew to 60 brood cows in 10 years. It paid off well, and by the time he got out of raising buffalo in 2005, the value of calves had risen from \$400 to about \$2,000 apiece.

To improve grazing land for the buffalo, Herren decided in 1994 to establish native warm-season grasses on highly erodible ground. That's when he found out about SARE.

"The people receiving SARE grants were doing things others weren't doing," he says. "So I was putting myself with people who were innovative and cutting edge."

With the grant, Herren planted four warm-season grasses: big bluestem, Indiangrass, switchgrass, and Eastern gamagrass. One of the reasons for planting these grasses, he says, was his unhappiness



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with fescue, due to fungus problems, and the observation that buffalo and elk do not really like it. Also, being an avid hunter and enjoying wildlife, warm-season grasses provided great habitat—protective cover and a great food source.

Of the choices, he says, switchgrass handles the stress of forage production and grazing the best of all. But all of the grasses took a couple of years to establish.

The grasses require no other input except fertilizer, if desired, which increases tonnage and growth. Herren usually burned the grasses every other year in sections, leaving some for habitat. Burning every other year puts nutrients from the dead plant material back into the soil in usable components of potash and phosphate.

Handling the 1,000- to 1,500-pound animals that graze on this grass called for creativity. To herd the buffalo through chutes, he used a shield mounted on the front of his tractor. Herren also installed an electrified, high-tensile fence, which was cheaper than regular fencing and has greater longevity.

Herren and his wife sold buffalo burgers at festivals and events where people

simulated what the world was like in the 1700s and 1800s with black powder guns and buckskins. The Herrrens also made a profit selling gift packs containing a selection of one or more of 14 different meat products.

However, profit is not the only benefit Herren received from raising buffalo. He says raising the animals brought him lasting friendships. For instance, if it were not for buffalo, Herren would never have met the man he now describes as the best of friends and "a grandpa" to him—Ray Smith from Longford, Kansas.

"Uncle Ray," as Herren called Smith, was one of the pioneers in buffalo, raising about 800 at his peak. He even led Herren and his wife on a once-in-a-lifetime trip to the Arctic Circle on sleds and snowmobiles, coming within 900 miles of the geographic North Pole. According to Herren, the passing of this friend was one of the reasons he got out of the business.

"It just wasn't the same without him."

Today, Herren spends most of his time running a hunting business on his land, and an airstrip accommodates out-of-state hunters on some of the land where the buffalo once roamed.

The buffalo may be gone from his land, but he says the experience was rewarding in more ways than one.

"It was a tough start, but my wife and I worked hard and the buffalo were financially rewarding in the end," he says. "We had 20 years of success and good luck and never got hurt. I met some wonderful people, made lifelong friends, and had some fun. It was a wonderful education and a great time. What more can you ask for?"

By Jason Peterson