

Idaho Rancher Steve Percy Works to Restore the Land

Steve Percy, a fourth-generation rancher, has experienced first-hand the urban pressure on agriculture. Seventeen years ago, as development created more crowding, he gave up ranching in southern California and moved to Idaho. Now, his ranching practices are helping to restore land east of Boise.

“When we bought this place, it had been through four or five owners in ten years,” he says. “The previous owners tried to farm it, but there’s only six inches of soil above the bedrock. They wanted to make something out of it that wasn’t meant to be.”

Percy does no cropping, concentrating instead on managing his 350 cow-calf pairs in an intensive grazing approach, which has paid off on multiple fronts. His pastures—shallow-rooted weeds and tumbleweed 17 years ago—are recovering. “We started seeing bulbous bluegrass, native squirreltail and Idaho fescue,” he explains. “Each year, you see a few more plants come back.”

Percy has installed fences to manage cattle movement and prevent overgrazing. As a result, he can monitor the herd more closely, and his cattle don’t mingle with others. “In the creek bottoms, they stay 10 days to two weeks. You watch the pasture and when you see a certain level of use, you move them. We calve in one field and then move the cows. We keep doing that, so we have very little sickness.” Percy’s management practices also yield economic benefits: as his pasture has improved, the cattle have required less in feed.

Percy praises USDA’s EQIP and CSP programs for rewarding smaller practices that make a difference. Working with EQIP matching funds, he relocated a corral so that a stream no longer runs through it. “People used to build the corrals right in the creek to water the livestock. We fenced the corral off from the creek and put in a water trough and a berm to control runoff. Our creek went from two inches deep to having good depth and water.”

As much as he values the federal programs, Percy

Type of Operation: Intensive-grazing cow and calf ranch

Land in Agriculture: 5,000 acres owned; 22,500 acres in leases and grazing permits

Greatest Challenge: Urban sprawl paving over good farmland near Boise

Program Participation: USDA’s Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Security Program (CSP)

Current Unmet Need: An easier process for programs such as CSP that promote the farm-to-community connection



PHOTO PROVIDED BY THE PERCY FAMILY

“Maybe we’ll realize the importance [of land] when food gets to be as expensive as gas. You can park your car, but you can’t park your appetite.”

— STEVE PERCY

sees room for improvement. For example, he suggests having interns who understand agriculture visit people on their operations and talk over what they could do with CSP. “[USDA] gives you this program, and you go home and try to fit your operation into it. It would be better if they could look at the operation and say, ‘Here, we’ll tailor the program to you if you do these things.’”

“Lots of people have gotten burned by government programs in the past. They need to show people simple things that they can do easily to make a difference. For instance, maybe if you recycle your oil you get \$100 a year for five years.”

Still, Percy thinks CSP is a real boon: “When you look at how you’ll cover property taxes and fuel bills and the rest, having CSP kind of relaxes you to concentrate on doing a better job at ranching.”

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Established in 1980, American Farmland Trust is the leading nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting our nation's farm and ranch land. AFT's mission is to stop the loss of productive farmland and to promote farming practices that lead to a healthy environment. AFT works at the federal level to effect farm policies and with states and local communities to enact strategies to save their land.

Why Save Farmland?

We rely on our best farmland to feed America and much of the world. In addition,

- Farmland provides more than 70 percent of the habitat for America's wildlife. Developing that land puts America's biological diversity at risk.
- America is becoming more dependent on imported food, some from countries with less stringent environmental and safety regulations.
- When farms and ranches are pushed off the most fertile soil, farmers are forced to rely more on fertilizers, pesticides and irrigation to do what the best land does naturally. Farmland loss has visible environmental impacts.
- The cost of basic services (schools, fire, police and maintenance) skyrockets in communities across the country that sacrifice farmland to uncontrolled growth. Scattered development increases taxes and makes services more costly.
- Agriculture provides millions of jobs both on the land and in secondary services. Farmland protection is an investment in the backbone of our economy.

We're Saving America's Farmland—where the need is most urgent and where success can have the greatest impact through a three-pronged strategy of:

- Protecting the Best Land by advancing conservation easement programs that allow farmers and ranchers to permanently keep their land in agriculture.
- Planning for Agriculture by developing and implementing sound community planning that achieves a balance between sensible growth and thriving agriculture.
- Keeping the Land Healthy by fostering the best farming practices and guiding farmers and ranchers to adopt these practices.

2007 Farm Policy Campaign

Convinced that strong federal farm policy is the key to saving farm and ranch land, AFT has launched an aggressive campaign aimed at policy change for the 2007 U.S. Farm Bill. We are working to transform U.S. farm policy to a system that links financial support to environmental stewardship and rewards farmers for producing healthy food, clean air and water, wildlife habitat and open space. A diverse and growing consensus is emerging among farmers, ranchers, conservationists, fiscal conservatives and public interest groups to create a new system. Our work on farm policy is rooted in our mission to protect farmland, ensure a future for agriculture and improve stewardship.

